PROCESSED WORLD 14

CHILD CARE UNIT F-4058K

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This new format cost us about $2000 to produce. Processed World depends on subscriptions and bookstore sales, so if you'd like to have PW sent directly to your home and help us to keep on publishing, PLEASE SUBSCRIBE!!

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MAIL TO: Processed World, 55 Sutter St. #829, San Francisco, CA 94104 USA

Summer 1985 • "The Magazine With A Bad Attitude" • ISSN 0735-9381
Processed World #14 marks a couple of beginnings: we have gone to a larger format primarily to provide more graphic possibilities, and this is the first time our special theme is on questions involving children, childcare, and learning.

Maxine Holz combines a look at feminist gender identity theory with a discussion of her own trials and tribulations as a new parent in Equal Opportunity Parents: Just How Equal Can We Be? In Motherhood and Politics? Monica Slade offers an impassioned defense of having children as a political act, and analyzes the problems of anti-child discrimination in society at large as well as within oppositional political movements.

Radical educator Herbert Kohl is interviewed in Computer Education = Processed Kids? wherein he discusses his views on the relationship between kids and computers and the uses of computers in education. Taking a different approach to education and “toys” is the article on Lego “play systems” translated from a West German magazine.

Our ongoing focus on the Underside of the Information Age continues with a revealing Tale of Toil about working in a Hewlett-Packard factory in Silicon Valley, A Day in the Life of Employee #85292. Also, Dennis Hayes dissects government and corporate research into computer hazards in a survey of VDT and other dangers called Unwanted Guests.

Jeff Goldthorpe’s fictional account of being a refugee in his own union hall after a stint at college, International Loafers and Winos Union, along with a selection of poetry round out this issue.

* * * * *

Those of you who are subscribers received our appeal for funds after our harrassment and eviction late last year. The instigator of the eviction, Bob Black (a.k.a. “The Last International”), continues his obsessive campaign to destroy Processed World. His 2 year vendetta (so far, 1 smashed down door, a glued lock, a busted lower lip, and some magazines slashed in different Bay Area bookstores), climaxed in June when he was interrupted at 2 A.M. pouring gasoline under our front door, and over the front of the building in which PW has its shop. By pure luck a resident of the building came home at just the right moment but unfortunately Black escaped into the night. Had he succeeded it’s possible that several people living here would have been killed. He’s believed to have left the Bay Area so if he turns up in your city, watch out!

* * * * *

This new format is an experiment so let us know how you like it—we might be forced back to the smaller size for money reasons anyway. Keep sending us your wonderful letters. Articles, stories, poetry, photos, and graphics are always welcome too (send copies cuz we can’t guarantee its return!). And send us money! Subscribe! Buy subscriptions for all your friends... Send donations (we hope to have tax-deductible status soon)... HEEEEELP!!

Processed World, 55 Sutter Street #829, San Francisco, California, 94104, USA
Dear PW:

I am a temporary word processor and I read your magazine. As I read it, it becomes obvious what you are against: routine, alienating dull work. But what are you for? Since you do not like the way offices are generally organized, what do you see as an alternative? I would like you to discuss these questions in your magazine.

There are many alternatives that people hold up as models of non-alienating organizations.

Some models you may see in a business school. There they sometimes talk of socio-technically designed offices where workers are organized into autonomous work groups that have no supervisor per se. Instead the workers share leadership responsibilities. They get paid according to the number of skills they learn as opposed to according to how long they've worked there. Instead of hiring a janitor, maintenance person or other person to do the shit work, they are responsible for doing the work themselves. No one person gets stuck with the shit work. No one person becomes boss or leader. They rotate jobs. Is this your model?

Or do you consider giving all the typing, filing, word processing and etc. to one person (the temp, the secretary or whoever) to be sticking him or her with all the shitwork? Would this make your ideal a company like PeopleExpress where there are no secretaries and if the president wants to send out a letter, he writes it by hand? Workers there also have some limited ownership of the company.

Is your model a socialist one? Is it an anarchist one? Does your model come from the way collectives were run in anarchist Spain during the civil war in the 30's? Does your model come from the way collectives and cooperatives operate now? Does your model come from the workplace democracy school of thought (Paul Bernstein, Daniel Zwerdling, Jean Neuman and others)? Is the PW organization a model of unalienated office and production work? Or is your work there alienated?

So one question I have for you is—"What is your idea of how an office or organization should be run?" This leads to other questions. How do you suggest we go from where we are now to where you wish to go? Pieces in your magazine advocate sabotage and theft, how does sabotage or theft move us closer to your vision of how offices or organizations should be run?

Or maybe I am barking up the wrong tree and you are against any and all forms of organization, including your own. Maybe you have not even thought about better situations. Do you exist just to object to the way things are without thought of an alternative or ways to create an alternative? Will you even answer these questions? Perhaps you will give a quick flip response or no response because you are too lazy to think about this.

To change society, it helps dramatically to know what you want to change it into.

The power of your publication would be greatly increased if you began to address these questions.

D.M. — Downey, CA
Hello there staffers,

It is true. I am white, well-educated and working in "management." I am also an artist. I am also a former hippy, a leftover radical/burnout from the heady 60's. Let's see, what other whistles can I blow on myself?? Ah, yes, I am a woman, and a feminist.

I put "management" in quotes because the net result of all my "lost" years and radical history has only just brought me to the point where I needn't be the first to answer the telephone when it rings anymore. Also, I sometimes have to supervise people in order to complete my assigned tasks and duties. Please don't think this means I have any power over either the direction or the form of the organization... because I don't.

Most of the railing comments against management in your publication are understandable. I am sure I would not be able to get hired, much less be able to work in a modern, electronic "back-office..." I even believe in stealing time on the job (who can truly do bullsh!t efficiently more than 6 hours a day, anyway?), and refusing to cater to the concept of hierarchical authority has long been a factor in my somewhat undistinguished "business career!"

Still, I have about as much interest in putting the "means of production" under the control of the average "co-worker" as I have in living through the results of a nuclear attack. Let's be honest. It is real easy to bitch and moan and feel self-righteous. It is far more difficult to come up with a coherent workable plan to transform the social and economic problems into utopian solutions.

Hatred is hatred and bigotry is bigotry. The tyranny of the "working class" would only be worse than what we have at present.

I find genuine joy in inspiring people (supervising) to successfully accomplish tasks that need doing in order to keep food on everyone's table (management). Suppose you don't like working for, say, banks, and you aren't able to figure out how to find a job that isn't for a bank. Then, why should I trust that you are going to be creative enough to protect my needs (if you succeed in putting yourself in charge) without any agreed upon plan for rebuilding the society? Your very inability to find some less exploitative job tells me that you have trouble with planning and implementation in your own life. No question that it isn't easy to find worthwhile work, but it isn't impossible. Formulating a new social structure will be far more difficult than finding a new job!

My personal preference is that we stop carping about technology and learn to use it to our own purposes. Computers are not going to disappear. Our hope and our opportunity is in creating alternative structures or "information networks," if you will, from which "common people" can begin to learn to speak openly with one another. Here's our chance to form true grass-roots organizations without the constraints of "mass media" redefining the "movement" out from under us on a daily basis.

It will not be enough to dismantle the authoritarian power structure of the world. At this point in history, said to say, that structure is only symptomatic of the real problem... individuals have insulated themselves from one another and have personally abdicated any responsibility for the world being in the mess that it is in. No go, guys!!! We are all responsible. We need to begin to unite and speak together about real solutions, as opposed to pretending we will become powerful by destroying "capital resources."

We will never defeat the power brokers unless we can unite the majority into acting for a plan that has some hope of providing for everyone's livelihood in some practical, easy to comprehend fashion.

I understand the need to rant and rave and let off steam. The injustice and horror is all very real. It's just that we need to remember not to let ranting and raving become a substitute for problem solving. Because after the "revolution," ranting and raving are just another form of tyranny.

Thank you for the opportunity to communicate.

F.L. — Santa Monica, CA

**ANA LOGUE**

When I joined the Processed World collective, nobody asked me what my politics were. In fact, my faith in historical processes, like my faith in an ultimate meaning of existence, is in constant flux from deep to tenuous.

I do believe, however, that making the workplace nicer, giving workers more responsibility, or otherwise changing the organization of labor in the office or factory, will not make our jobs any less alienating. For it is capitalism itself and its reduction of life to the pursuit of profit that is the cause of our dissatisfaction.

A case in point: I worked as a temp in the human resources department of a large, publicly controlled, utility. A resource, according to the O.E.D. is "a means of supplying some want or deficiency; a stock or reserve upon which one can draw when necessary." In business and government, it is the common denominator by which our destinies as human beings can be dealt with "objectively" in the manner of raw materials, equipment, and financial reserves. The lawyers in this department keep track of collective bargaining agreements in other industries with an eye to winning concessions with its unions when their contracts expire. The department's actuaries study ways of reducing retirement benefits. The lawyers and actuaries were very nice people. Sometimes, at my request, they even let me work at home for the same hourly rate as if I were in the office.

Of course, the "bottom line uber alles" is what makes American the great imperial power it is. As a temp working in the banks, insurance companies, and other institutions of that ilk, I feel like I am a foot soldier in the occupying army of the large corporations that rule the free-world empire. But through my work with Processed World, I also feel like a member of a fifth column posed to sow dissent, divulge secrets, or otherwise undermine the corporate structure. I do not think there will be a revolution, or a strong shift in values, in my life time. But I believe it is really important that we struggle to maintain our humanity in the face of wage slavery, competition for jobs, and a consumerist culture in which people are measured by their spending power.

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**PRIMITIVO MORALES**

Stung by accusations of laziness, I push myself to my writing machine and start composing an answer to D.M. My work at PW is not alienated—it can
BRINGING THE WAR HOME

We had to bomb the village in order to save it...

There goes the neighborhood!
be tedious, repetitive, frustrating, even hard. But it is not alienated in any real sense. I am not earning money for somebody else (save very indirectly the paper maker, etc.), and I am not helping to create some power above/outside of myself. I am doing these activities so that I may have more contact with people, so that more people can find some forum for their ideas. The end product, the magazine, is not a commodity in the sense that we produce it to earn money. If I had to collate pages, or worse yet, run them through the folding machine, 8 hours a day for General Amalgamated Inc., that would be alienated labor, even if I liked/used/needed the end product. There's such a thing as too much of a good thing—the only activity I like to engage in for 8 uninterrupted hours is sleep. The odious tasks are relatively short-lived and scarce because of our schedule. We all share in the needed labors, but they aren't an everyday problem.

Are we a model for other organizations and enterprises? No... not really, because we are a few volunteers doing something spread over a long period of time. Clearly our form couldn't work for a project which needs to work continuously such as a women's health center, or an organizing office.

Do we have a model we look to? Not really... most of us have been in other groups, each with their own ways. We try to come up with a structure that answers the needs of production and the needs of the personnel. We're certainly not an imitation of the Spanish anarchists, the RCP, some industrial management clown, or somebody's school.

I advocate sabotage (on-the-job direct action); not for everybody—if you get along well with your work situation, aren't being ripped off, and aren't producing lethal "goods," then there's no point. But most of us have had, or will have, a job where we are being robbed: of time, money, respect... some thing or quality. This kind of abuse is damaging. Just as the colonized may come to identify with the colonizer, or the oppressed with the oppressor, and the censored artist comes to internalize the censorship, these daily and minute abrasions grind us down. For me sabotage is one way of striking back, of saying that I am real, I do count, and I am not entirely powerless. My boss may be the target, or perhaps some defiler of the land, or maybe some military creature. The result may not even be noticed, but I know. At times we are in places where collective action isn't possible (because of isolation or repression), yet the need to "intervene" remains. The greatest sabotage would be a reshaping of what is made, and how, and by whom. We are not there yet, maybe never will be (that bright bright nuclear flash one day), but even petty sabotage helps us maintain morale, and helps us to wear them down (yes, Virginia, there is an "us/them" worldview here). It may actually hurt them—as when the USS Ranger was towed back to port because some sailor dumped a 3' monkey wrench into the main drive gear (how many Vietnamese—and Americans—lived longer because that ship wasn't on station?), or it may only raise the cost of doing business.

I've never believed in blueprints for the future—we, here and now, cannot know the conditions faced by others, at different points in time. Generations of people have written on the subject and none of them have really predicted what we're living in now (some are close, but none, of course, are accurate). Nor is it for me/us to prescribe for others—if a person's imagination is so limited that they can't conjure up a better world, maybe even with a few concrete ideas, then I feel sorry for them. Me, I get too embarrassed to talk of my hopes for a day that will probably only come long after I've been recycled. Nor do I think that describing the Emerald City will give us a better idea of where to put our feet next in order to get there. But maybe I'm wrong.

How to create an alternative...
question with no dollar value. It will not be answered by theoreticians but by people, 'de base' (grass roots) actually finding answers in the course of their (changing) lives. I offer no final answers, no ultimate truths, no perfect utopias, only a grim knowledge that things cannot continue as they are or all is lost, and a hope that someday all of us can answer 'What do we want to do today?'

MED-O

F.L.: Thanks for one of the best letters yet criticizing PW. Like D.M.'s letter, you take us to task for not developing positive solutions to the worldwide misery we are part of. Actually your thoughtful letter is part of the solution: open communication and dialogue. While this alone won't change a damn thing, it is essential for constructing collective actions that will.

Your statement that 'Formulating a new social structure will be more difficult than finding a new job!!' is right on target. Indeed, it will require millions of Americans to locate their 'identity' and livelihood outside of any job we now conceive of. It means everyone re-examining the very assumptions behind what we do everyday and questioning the oppressive habits universally assumed to be 'necessary.' Is working 40 hours a week in a downtown office really the best way to 'provide' for your family? Is a personal computer 'valuable' if its manufacture requires burning out the eyes of young Malaysian women who assemble its chips? If income level shouldn't determine access to resources, what should? Intelligence? Artistic talent? Moral character? Community activism?

Perhaps the most important question is the following: What would you do on Monday morning if the buying and selling of human time was abolished? I'd try to start or join some kind of affinity group, collective, union or 'community' to discuss what is still worth doing and what isn't. Now is that wildly utopian or what? Well, it's a lot less fantastical than PW positing a plan or model for everyone to follow.

It's on the issue of who's responsible for the current mess we're in that I totally disagree with you. You see "individual insulation and abdication of responsibility" as the source of the problem. I don't. If, as you state, "authoritarian structure is only symptomatic of the real problem" (i.e., the symptom of individual weaknesses) then I guess mass psychotherapy is all we need to set things straight. Perhaps Rogerian counseling is the solution to the 'inferiority complex' of black South Africans.

It's all too clear that the primary cause of our misery is international capitalism, both corporate and state sponsored. To be sure, most of us (myself included) are fucked-up and need to undergo significant interpersonal changes. In particular, changing the patterns of patriarchy, the work ethic, racism, and self-destructiveness will require a great deal of individual psychological work. Yet, as with all social matters, the forces of change are interactive. Individual consciousness and social superstructure dynamically influence each other. But it's a real backward step (despite its current fashionability) not to see social superstructure as having primacy. It was the structural abolition of slavery (not individual strength of character among slaves) which significantly improved conditions for Blacks after the Civil War.

Your misguided analysis regarding the primary source of the world's problems is perhaps why you believe "The tyranny of the working class would only be worse than what we have at present." Leaving aside the outmoded labeling (what is tyranny of the working class but old useless, rhetoric?), it's absurdly elitist to think the self-interest of a tiny minority of capitalist managers makes for a better world than the desires of the vast majority who now carry out their dictates. If economically forced labor and the profit motive were eliminated (highly probably if working people determined the organization of society) why would anyone freely choose to manufacture and ship carcinogenic pesticides (banned in the U.S.) to Third World countries? What would compel you to build nuclear bomb components and sell them to Israel in order for them to be re-sold to South Africa? What possible incentive would there be to sit in front of a VDT screen 8 hours a day and input numbers for Bank of America?

Perhaps if workers were in power things would be more bumbled and inefficient than they are now. (Although I doubt that's really possible.) But do you really think the living conditions for most people in the world would be as cruel and murderous as they are now? If you recoil from the thought of the "means of production under the control of the average co-worker," then precisely who should run things? Techno-experts? New Age management specialists? Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda?

It's true the obsolete notion of the 'working class' won't suffice in creating a new society for post-industrial America. Throughout the past decade other social movements (anti-nuclear, feminist, environmental, anti-apartheid, etc.) have far surpassed labor in actually effecting progressive social change. And this exposes a profound dilemma for American radicals. While the ideology of 'workers as a class' is pure nostalgia in the U.S., worker solidarity is absolutely essential for creating the positive plans you wish PW would formulate. As always, workers are also in the best position to halt the existing machinery of social control. Both approaches need to happen simultaneously.

You think that "destroying capital resources" is merely "pretending we will become powerful." Well, conceptualizing and popularizing practical solutions may be necessary, but it's also insufficient. As with Polish Solidarity in 1980, the most coherent plan to equitably and freely organize society will fail unless certain 'capital resources' (like the military, secret
police, the technology of surveillance, etc.) are thoroughly undermined. Most existing capital will have to be either destroyed, paralyzed, or re-tooled in order for social life to democratically transform itself. For the moment at least, the real power gained from subverting capital resources prefigures utopian solutions. Otherwise the most likely outcome is that the structure perpetuating profit, humans as commodities, murder, and mutation will keep spiraling on.

Still, it's extremely important to propagate concrete, progressive solutions—if for no other reason than to spark our imaginations and reverse the pervasive hopelessness characterizing this age of alienation. F.L.'s letter makes a crucial point: radical libertarians need to seriously discuss the possibility of a social "plan that has some hope of providing for everyone's livelihood in some easy to comprehend fashion." To that end, please send us your comments.

************

LUCIUS CABIN

I strongly disagree that we should be either developing a blueprint for the reorganization of society and production, or suggesting how to manage office life in the here and now. The pursuit of a specific plan contradicts a basic assumption of our perspective, i.e. that social life should be consciously organized by everyone (or at least everyone who wants to participate).

However, I do think it's worthwhile to discuss different ideas to show that the way things are is not the only way it could be. Our imaginations can and should be directed toward alternatives that people could actually begin to implement in the absence of the innumerable social constraints and institutions they now face. Social change is inevitable; the direction it takes is not. Therefore our imagining avoids religion/millenarian assumptions that suggest sudden and total social transformation to the promised land. On the other hand, we must posit radical changes in people's relationship to nature, their work and each other.

It's true that since about PW #5 or so we have avoided explicit tactical advocacy. What emerged, by default, were accounts of individual actions for emotional and psychic survival in the office. One part of this is anti-management agitation, another part is sabotage. This reflects our experience that most people are not involved in collective responses to the modern office. But it felt different when the magazine started. At that time (1980-81) one of the largest strikes of private sector office workers in recent memory was taking place (150 workers at Blue Shield in S.F.). Our initial interest in sabotage and related activities was developed partly in response to this collective context. the power of the workers was being destroyed by the company and the union. A return to direct action would have given them much more power vis-a-vis Blue Shield. Such office occupation and/or seizure of precious data is obviously illegal under labor and criminal law. The law in this society never sanctions any kind of real power for workers.

But what if human beings could set up something different? One of my first concerns coming from the "office context," would be to answer the questions. What is useful information? Useful to whom? And for what? In general, the only useful information in such a society would be that which helps people coordinate their activities with each other, and to communicate freely among themselves. All the information now collected for purposes of money/property exchange and social control—probably 60-80% of all office work—could be abolished and no one would have to do these stupid things.

But assuming that there is some useful information that needs to be handled in any society, it remains to be decided how that work should be organized. Should its "handling" be integrated into the activities it refers to, or should it be maintained as a separate "administrative" function? In either case, in fact in any given "enterprise" (a group of humans doing something together), there would be a difference of decision-making power (as yet undetermined) between those who stay and take a lot of responsibility and put a lot of their lives into it, and those who are just "passing through" for a month or a year, trying it out. This in turn assumes that we are discussing a society in which individuals have an unprecedented amount of freedom to move around and do different things, and not to get locked in to any kind of "career" unless they so desired. The actual decision-making process of any given group should be established by those involved. (Similarly there would have to be an agreed-upon relationship between the particular group and the larger community regarding the use of resources, the social utility of the products, and the effects of the activity on broader, socially agreed-upon goals and purposes.)

All this no doubt sounds a bit "pie in the sky" in the context of this outrageously barbaric, ultrahierarchical, and over-specialized world. How must such arrangements come about? What will it take to break through the inertia and amnesia that leave so many people feeling afraid of change instead of passionately committed to it? No small group or publication can possibly change this situation by itself. Then again, we must try for our own sakes if for no other reason. And if we try, and others try other things, then eventually a social movement with exciting possibilities may erupt.

The crux of a new social movement, in my opinion, should revolve around what we do, and why we do it. This means that people begin to seriously examine what they do every day for money, and why. As the answers become clear, changes in our willingness to go on, as well as changes in how we define what we "need," seem inevitable. In essence this means a return to individual subjectivity, combined with an awareness that human freedom is found in cooperation, in a society freed from coercive social institutions like money/wage-labor, national frontiers, hierarchical power, corporations, etc. Processed World contributes to this general goal insofar as we challenge these basic institutions that so many take for granted, and insofar as we raise doubts about the value or purpose of the majority of work done. Our Letters and Tales of Toil feature "average folks" [like ourselves] talking about their situations; this contributes to a return to subjective sensibilities crucial to the larger changes we are interested in.

We make no claims to having the answers, and we don't want to be just a "bitching and moaning" zine. But we also don't want to get caught in a "realistic" politics that force one to a policy of social reform as the best we can hope for. In fact social reform is profoundly unrealistic, because radical change is needed.
urgently to reverse the destruction of the planet and prevent mass human starvation/war/poisoning etc. Our freedom and happiness (and possibly survival) are dependent on revolutionary changes in daily life that depart from every model or social system created in the past few hundred years. We are in a unique position historically, materially, and psychologically. Our solutions must reflect this. They must not be predetermined by those who believe they are "in the know," but should evolve as people grapple with the enormously complex and difficult questions that I have barely touched on in this short letter. Thanks to D.M. and F.L. for writing. We hope this dialogue continues and urge other readers to send in their own ideas/rebuttals/expansions, etc.

LOUIS MICHAELSON

F.L. states that "people have insulated themselves from one another and have personally abdicated any responsibility for the world." This is blaming the victim, arguably the cornerstone of the American ideology (filipside; anyone can succeed by their own talent and efforts). Yet there is a core of truth to it. The real meaning of the much-abused term "alienation" is that people trade (alienate) their control over much of their social activity, i.e. their work, in exchange for money. In a sense this is indeed an "abdication of responsibility"—but one enforced by the whole existing society and its ideology. Each individual is confronted with a choice: sell their work-time to a company or government (directly as an employee, indirectly as a craftperson or retailer); or face whatever their nation does to the jobless (welfare, starvation, jail). Collectively, their sold or alienated work—producing merchandise in factories, circulating money and data in offices, performing services in restaurants, etc.—recreates every day the horrendous world we live in. At the positive pole of this vast flow of human time and energy are the top owner-managers of business and government. But they too are largely constrained by the laws of the world market and the web of institutions, states and power-blocs. The collective entity known as "Ronald Reagan," for instance, cannot simply nuke the USSR or Lebanon, much as he/would like to; nor can General Motors make just any vehicles it pleases and charge whatever price, because like all businesses it must compete and profit in order to survive.

The result is that all of us, from the highest to the lowest, unwittingly reproduce a society over which we have no control, and which is destroying us and planet. Its masters (and occasional mistresses) are the least likely to contest it; not only are they the best protected from its ravages, but they are its super-slaves, who have saturated themselves with its values in order to succeed on its terms. Conversely, those most likely to transform the present world are those with the least personal stake in it and the most collective power to destroy it. By and large this means neither the professionals (too comfortable) nor the desperately non-employed poor (too powerless). It can only mean the ordinary routine workers, whether clerical, industrial or service. One of the most carefully suppressed facts of modern history is that just such people—not "great thinkers" like Marx—"invented" socialism/community/anarchism nearly two hundred years ago. They have also devised in practice a host of new kinds of libertarian social forms—committees of correspondence, neighborhood clubs, factory committees, cooperatives, "parliaments of the streets," independent unions, Solidarities. Even in the U.S. Even now, here and there.

There's no need to fear working-class power. It is precisely in coming together to exercise such power that the "stupid, bigoted brutal" workers shed their stupidity, bigotry and brutality—the psychological and cultural byproducts of slavery—and begin thinking and acting in new ways. The Civil Rights movement, one of the largest recent exercises of working-class power in this country (who did most of the sitting-in, boycotting, striking, marching, but workers and their children?) resulted in a 50% drop in violent crime throughout the South while it lasted. In the Seattle General Strike of 1919, the workers ran that city (including communal kitchens and laundries) for a week. They made a rough port-and-timber town so peaceful that it could be successfully policed by unarmed workingmen. What we should fear is the power of political bureaucrats and "revolutionary intellectuals" acting in the people's name, colonizing their organs of decision and action, dominating their debates, leeching the power out of their hands in the name of "efficiency" and "discipline." It is that power, not workers' power, we see in the monstrosity usually called socialism or communism.

Which brings us to the question of utopia. Marx and other genuine revolutionaries of the nineteenth century opposed utopianism because they understood that the new society would (as other PWers have pointed out here) be the collective creation of countless people acting unforeseeably. For reasons much too complex to go into here, the old workers' movement these revolutionaries were part of failed, and the capitalist-statist-system triumphed. In the process, it managed to cut off the working people of the developed countries not only from the more radical moments of their own history, but from any different kind of life-experience or set of values against which the system's could be measured (e.g. the tribe, the farming village). The system came to surround us on all sides, largely dominating language, imagination, thought. For this reason, I believe that utopian thinking—the sustained effort to imagine another human world without hierarchical power, national frontiers, patriarchy, or the exploitation of people or nature—has become essential for radical change.

Fortunately, the system remains contradictory, continually compelling people to rebel against various aspects of itself. Such rebellion ranges from tiny, invisible everyday revolts like go-slow, sabotage and absenteeism, through strikes, demonstrations, large-scale civil disobedience and direct action, to movements like those in Poland in 1980-81 or South Africa today. True, all but the largest and most coherent of these revolts tend either to subside
without leaving any significant trace, or else (as to some extent with the Civil Rights, women’s, gay, ecology and peace movements) to become mere feedback loops by which the system corrects itself. On the other hand, any real social struggle, however small, provides a chance for people to experience at first hand the voluntary cooperation, solidarity, open debate and collective decision-making on which (I believe) the new society must be based. Only such experience can break the barriers of isolation imposed by the work-for-pay system and its corollaries—the single-family home, the shrivelling of community, the rule of the mass media. Only such experience can make utopia more than wistful dreaming for the many, by opening cracks in the smooth façade of the system’s assumptions. F.L.’s “information networks” are very much a part of this process—PW is one such, but we need plenty more, in preparation for the unpredictable day when social crisis may break out once again (in 1958, could anyone have foreseen 1968?). We also need utopian imagining, without which the new opposition will fall short or get lost. The French critic Michel Abensour said it best: “The proper function of utopia is the education of desire.”

**PAXA LOURDE**

I would like to repeat the point that *Processed World* is a small group of people who can’t begin to draw a definitive master plan for social change. The world has had enough small groups that try to dictate for everybody a way of life, a religion, an economic system, a hemline.

However, I do think that PW could talk more about concrete ways of getting over. As a regular temporary office worker, I often find myself isolated, struggling to find a way to maintain my self-respect, energy and at the same time strike a blow against the man. It’s hard. I have found that petty acts of sabotage work wonders in preserving some sense of social distance and creative rebellion. Still, I find sabotage conflicts with wanting to do a ‘good job’ just to make the work interesting (internalized Protestant ethic?). One solution is to make it all like building sand castles. I absorb myself in mundane tasks only to delight in their eventual destruction. But even this becomes boring and lifeless after a while and I long for real creativity.

I have thought about really organizing an office. But over what kinds of issues? Health and safety stuff work well and I have had moderate success in raising awareness of the danger of VDTs, photocopier machine fumes, stress, and so forth. But this emphasis is obviously limited and only barely begins to tackle the deeper issues of social control and utility. What sort of workplaces are organizeable? Most workers realize that the agents of out-spoken rebellion will almost certainly find themselves flat-ass on the pavement, having accomplished jackshit. This country’s labor laws and labor unions continue to be sorrier and sorrier jokes. Workers councils can be effective. My idea of councils is pretty informal. I envision workers ignoring official hierarchical structures and just getting together outside of the workplace at a local bar or café to talk about different ways to organize production or pressure the boss. The place I am working at now has a structure like this in place. It works pretty well, but funny, it is male dominated and as a result of its clandestineness, undemocratic.

But is worrying about ‘how to organize’ a way of ignoring the forms of resistance that already exist in most offices? Most places I find myself in have elaborate gossip networks, stiff etiquette of relations between supervisors and their charges, clear recognition of varying capabilities and tolerances among the workers. Simply describing all of this is an important project. It is clear that organizational models developed for 19th and early 20th century industrial shop floors are unsuitable for contemporary offices and robotized factories. If we are to develop effective models, we need to pay attention to what is actually happening. My disappointment with PW is that we don’t do more of this.

One last comment—I don’t believe in privileging workplace politics. Other issues (peace, racism, ecology, feminism…) motivate some people more than dealing with some bullshit job. I guess all you can do is pick up the pieces where you find them.

**more LETTERS**

Hello there...

I love to cook and act in the theatre and ride my bike a great deal and I write poetry and I work in an office downtown.

I was introduced to *Processed World* by a cynical body-builder. She’s also my boss. I work under the table for the US Court: isn’t that ironic? Isn’t that typical?

I like working here because I can talk dirty to my boss, because I don’t have to comb my hair, because every once in a while I get to drink a beer while I busily type away, because I get to watch the burgers outside the window rummage through the garbage. You see, our office has a locked door and a mirrored glaze on the window.

We can see out… but they can’t see in. It clarifies perspective, and when you know where you are it makes observation valid.

Enclosed are some observations I’ve made about the processed world with which we are intrinsically entombed, about the processed food we suck, about the processed art we buy, about the processed airwaves that tip toe and then pounce on us from boxes of all shapes and sizes.

I’ll be watching from behind my office window. I’ll be eating a carry-out sandwich. I’ll sing in any color I please. I’ll insult corporate whores and big business boozes.

Your toy and mine,
M.Q. — Tucson, AZ

Helen Highwater

PW,

Here I sit in a classroom in a high school in suburbia. The students are having a discussion, defying the teacher’s quest for control (how rebellious of them!).

The height of the conversation is a new situation comedy and confessions of what was watched on TV last night. They have memorized a day by day account of what’s on, when, what channel, and of course a full knowledge (and belief, I almost like to think) of fictional happenings on the tube.

This happens every day here in Suburbia. What has happened to what was supposed to be a free thinking country, political awareness, intelligence, and just plain intellectualism? Why aren’t these
kids discussing their futures, their feelings?

Most of these people are going to be living in suburbia all their lives. It is incorporated into their minds that the socially accepted ideal, success, is to: get married, get a well-paying job, buy a house in suburbia, and have children.

What commonly happens in result is: divorce, a job they hate, a house in suburbia, out of control children. And of course the Television God.

TV sets ideals for these sheep. It is far more corrupting than it is educating. I suppose it’s not what you watch, but how you watch it.

Donna the Dead—Concord, CA

Dear Processed World,

What the bloody hell?! Thought I would drop you people a few lines! I’m still a prisoner in the Missouri Dept. of Corrections! I’ll inform (you) when I get released. Which will be Oct., 1986!

Goddamn I’m looking forward to getting out and finding me a J.O.B.! The whole board wasn’t impressed when I answered the question: “What are your plans if you were released today?” Answer: “Oh...I’ll get a part-time job and go fishing every summer and I have a friend who—” “We see here in your file that you have never held a job for a period any longer than four months. Why is that?” I could have easily answered something like: “It’s none of your business, frog brain!” I’m compassionate though! Instead, I said: “Well, I do a lot of traveling, see.” I knew though that none of them ‘saw,’ so what the bloody hell? I like PW probably too much. No really! I’m impressed with the letters you print, and the stories are great! I was once a salesman for a rip-off chemical company. If anyone needs info on how to lie, cheat, and steal hard earned greenbacks from gullible folks, then baby I can open your grey-cells up to an enlightened level that will blow your crapping mind! Don’t get me wrong, huh?! I’ve got a conscience! That’s why I’m a poor bumming anarchist. I’m the lowest class bum there is! If by chance there is even a lower class bum even lower or just as low as me, then you can’t rest easy knowing that something somewhere is about to come unglued; and I’m not speaking of ‘red-baiting’ either buddy!!

An Anarchist to Death!—S.S.—MO

Dear PW,

Your publication is dynamite! I very much enjoyed reading issue 13... I’d like to submit a biting, colorful, cynical, rehash-of-reality of how I obtained SSI at age 35 (1982) and the facts thereof. I love to write. (I should be writing my book (about prostitution and my personal experiences/adventures) that I began in ’81, the same year I applied for SSI...) So many everyday insanities/realities/legends to contend with moment by moment! Your writers in issue 13 echo and magnify what countless of us feel/see/hear/think/experience! Yeah, I was blown away... I’m 36 now... often wish I was an innocent-arrogant 22 again... sometimes feel like I’m 50... live by myself but not alone in a H.U.D. project which of course is pseudo-socialized housing for the “low-income”—a nice term for POOR, disenfranchised people on the edges of the mainstream.

What it all comes down to is that there’s simply too many damn people in our country and the world! (I had a tabulation by choice in ’73!) This violent-insane country-society is experiencing and manifesting the affects of a population explosion that’s been exploding for 30 years!! You know there’s too many damn OVER-BREEDERS! I’ve been erotically intimate with; sucked cocks of, played with, danced with, talked with, socialized with numerous people of many races and nationalities, of both sexes. I’m an atheist with Buddhist leanings—but damn-it-to-hell! ALL the races are creating/reproducing too many other humans! I’m sick of self-righteous-nazi-dykes and others with
white-liberal-guilt asserting that we’re all racist! It all boils down to this economic system of capitalism and so-called christianity! Religious hype-tripe crap that’s spread and spread into a huge, overwhelming cancer all over this planet!

By the way…this is “recycled” paper. I like to at least help save TREES, as well as money, spent on xeroking and typing-paper sheets. I also like to share the stuff printed on the back of my letters…(I had a C.E.T.A. job at our recycling center. I loved it. After 4 months, of course, NO job. End of contract for this kind of “subsidized slavery”—free workers for organizations who have to beg & cry for funding.)

Since I receive a few crumbs from the gov’t. Each month to survive on and pinch my pennies for my obsession-passion for taking pictures, experiencing photography, capturing reality in an image of my own creation. I wish, if I had a hot shot job and a good-car. I could zoom up to S.F. and share in your socializing and talks and visit you people. (You’re more than welcome to call me & come visit Sanity-Cruz and let me take you on a surrealistic-tour! (Really! No shit!) We’ve become a miniature-Manhattan of sorts. With a county, (growing), of “only” 200,500 or so, we’ve got about one of everything that exists in a metropolis including one “dirty” book store; one “gay” bar, and one ghetto. Used to have a dirty-movie-porno-theatre. The owner who lived in San Mateo with 2 wives, five cars, three other porno-theatres, got chased out of here by legal-petition means and the fire marshall. I WORKED as a cashier & answered telephones at the dirty-movie place…for about a month. I wrote a great eye-opening article about the job-place. (Didn’t get paid… it was in a weekly “alternative,” poor-post-hippie-newspaper). I’ve had incredible adventure/ misadventures in trying to “fit”—to do a job, be employed in “straight” day to day occupations…Are you interested? You’re not a tight-mostly-fraternity-of-editors-writers, are you? I’m also a compassionate, sensitive, affectionate, curious individual who shares concerns with all kinds of people, including my 2 cats and my overbreeding neighbors.

Sincerely & frighteningly yours,
A.S.—Santa Cruz, CA
P.S. I cheered & smirked at the Kelly Girl Klone article! My hobbies are: smoking cigarettes & masturbations & biting my nails.

photo: Rachel Johnson

Dear PW,

During the past two and a half years I have been working in San Francisco as a clerk, secretary, receptionist, and technical assistant. I am a male who is married and have one child who is now 15 months of age. It is from this San Francisco office experience that I have come to understand the meaning of wage-slavery and its effects on the joys of parenting in this processed world.

During the first three months of our child’s life both my wife and I were at home. That was a truly joyful time despite the fact of depending solely on unemployment benefits. The household work did not interfere with parenting, like the 9-to-5 work-a-day-world does, mainly because housework did not deny the desire to be with my family. But after returning to the work force, the restrictions and exploitations of the corporate office world became painfully clear.

From the start, I felt unnerved by the job that I was doing called document retrieval. I had retrieved documents for myself and others during my school and work study days, but I didn’t remember the task as being so odious. At this job, however, I saw how the rapacious business psychology of the profit motive induces management to attempt to shape the behavior, outlook, and soul of the worker.

The receptionists were laid off one day and for quite some time I had two jobs, the one that I was hired for and then as receptionist to boot. Still receiving my original one-job salary and willing to “help out” for a while, the days turned into many weeks.

Arriving home on those evenings I seemed to lack the energy for the kind of interaction that is truly rewarding for any family. Total relaxation, if not deep sleep, was wanted on the menu and thus even dinner could become just another task of the day. Food to be processed. The frenzied workspace of the day carried over to the evening. At times I would ask, what have I done today? Has the day’s work helped to improve or only to sustain my family?

Working there was a horror. Never before had I seen how the profit motive destroys life. And it was not only the workers there who were exploited, but the University of California libraries as well. The corporate design of the multiversity goes well beyond mere business propaganda and extends to transforming the university libraries into photocopying factories of the multinationals. So there I was working to provide for my family by slaving all day at providing the companies that are destroying the earth with the information needed to carry out their destruction. And in the office I had to refer to the job as “professional document retrieval.” Could I come home at the end of the day and partake in any real meaningful interaction with my wife or child?

There were many more facets of that job that were detrimental to family-life, and my suggestion of on-site child care was just one more reason to be ridiculed and harassed by my bosses. The denial of on-site child care is especially discriminating against males. In order for child care responsibilities to be equally shared among women and men, we have to debunk the idea that only single working mothers have the need for child care facilities at their places of work. Capitalism
writes that I have to work eight hours a day—
So I do. But why shouldn’t we wage slaves at least have the satisfaction of spending our 15 minute breaks with our children? Or would on-site child care facilities allow the children to see what was ahead and thus resist their processing for the office of the future?

After being fired for having a “bad attitude” I was hired as a clerk-typist at a local non-profit institution. Although I was determined not to work for a profit-seeking employer, the economic necessity of find work right away led me to accept the first thing that came along. Although the workload is not quite as heavy as before, I am still away from my child all day and receiving only enough money to eat and pay rent. I do not come home as tired as I used to, but I do still tend to be somewhat uneasy due to the authoritarian constraints of the day.

So I read PW wanting to hear more because it all sounds too true. I hope more people both read and write about the other side of the corporate money economy and this mess it has us all in.

P.M. — San Francisco

Dear folks at PW,

I worked last summer waitressing in a bar. It was fairly slow at first but became very busy over July & August. The ten of us worked together in harmony until early in August when our boss (who had always been a reasonable and approachable person) called a staff meeting and accused us all of stealing money. She was pretty wily, didn’t give any of us enough information to make the situation clear but the accusations flew. Needless to say, we were all stunned. She spoke to the bartenders and the waitresses separately, causing suspicion and division among us. After I had gotten over the initial shock of the “charge” brought against us, I realized how our boss had virtually set us up against each other. A couple of the other waitresses and myself did some skulking and found out that the profits had dropped by $10,000 in the month of July, but instead of checking out attendance numbers or figuring that people may not be drinking as much cos they have no income, management immediately blamed us. Because some of the people I worked with were really oppressed by the danger of losing their job (funny how people can feel guilty even when they haven’t done any-

thing), not much protest happened. But we 3 sleuth waitresses questioned our bosses, defied the rules as often as we could and supported each other when the anger and frustration became so burdensome, it nearly exploded out of us. It’s no fun being watched closely and judged by fellow workers. The rest of the summer made us all kinda nervous.

I’m now back at school and only working part-time but the same tactics are being used. Currently there are many more employees but management still tries to set us up against each other so no real

solidarity happens. Fortunately there are enough people who refuse to be co-opted into spying on their fellow workers—these are my friends and they help to keep my faith in human dignity alive.

But then there’s my friend Dan who’s mostly genius and a superb woodworker who gets paid $4 an hour to churn out cheap furniture that people can afford but don’t appreciate. He’s frustrated cos he can’t produce the beauty that’s in his head.

And my friend Frieda, who’s an outrageously talented seamstress and artist who lives on welfare cos she can’t bring herself to sell her skills the way our society compels us to.

And Lawrence who tries to find jobs for guys who are out on parole—these people can be and are sent back to jail because they’re not looking hard enough for work. It’s hard enough to find a job, much more so if you have a “record.”

It reminds me of the old unemployment insurance blues—they’ll penalize you for quitting your job, expect you to be satisfied to live on ¾ of your wage (which was probably peanuts to start with), and then cut you off if you dare to get so depressed that you stop looking for the job you know isn’t out there. (Victoria has the second highest rate of unemployment in Canada.)

I hate the system we live in and sometimes I feel crushed by it. I’m trying to do some learning but the university here isn’t exactly a hotbed of political awareness. Too many silly kids with vacant minds and designer clothes. Too many pros who are hellbent on perpetuating the lies we continue to be taught.

I guess I’ll just keep trying to develop my humanness so I won’t get brainwashed into thinking it’s a fantasy to want the emotional warmth that comes from being close to other people. (In my paranoid moments, I get to thinking the computerization of most everything will gradually turn us into robots!) But I grew a vegetable garden this summer and picked berries that grew in the woods (for free) so I could make jam and wine to keep the winter at bay, and these days I hug my friends a lot and turn my face to the sun when it pokes through the clouds. I also read Processed World which is a joy cos of your great sense of humor about a world that’s sometimes hard to find anything funny in, but mostly cost it’s always a reminder that lots of us are out there, still fighting, still strong.

Thanks & much love,

J.H.-P. — Victoria, B.C.

Dear Processed World,

I used to find your magazine amusing, but Drugs: A Corrosive Social Cement [PW #11] made me realize how utterly thoughtless you people can be.

“Taking pleasure in one’s own thought processes, perceptions, and feelings can be a genuinely subversive experience”— well of course! But this is clearly the main reason to reject the use of drugs. A wise person once said, “If you cannot stop profound ideas and insights while straight, then they are not yours to begin with.” Ever heard the expression, “Don’t take him seriously—that’s the liquor talking”? I say drugs are the total opposite of “taking pleasure in one’s own thought processes, perceptions, and feelings.”

Your writer babbles on and on about the insight and pleasure to be derived from surrendering one mind, however temporarily, to a stupid chemical. Be real! These feelings are illusions at best, and comparing them to self-acquired insight and pleasure is like comparing being strapped into a rollercoaster to going skate-
Dear P.W.,

Let's face it, being surrounded by maybe friends and lovers, making thousands of dollars a day, and doing it from the comfort of our own yachts, sounds like a pretty appealing way to make a living to most people. With a couple of hundred bucks, a couple of contacts and a little business savvy, that life could be yours in less than a year. How you may ask? Simple, deal drugs, any and all drugs, and if you don't over-indulge in your product sampling, the money, friends and freedom that comes with being your own boss, is yours.

Sound too good to be true, wondering where the catch is, and how do I know it works? Good questions and maybe I'll answer them out of that great fount of wisdom, Personal Experience.

Enough of that late night TV commercial, no more comic book come-ons and cereal box sweepstakes. I like the article on drugs in Processed World #11. I won't go into specific complaints about some of the details, I'd rather concentrate on a simple note based on my own observations. Don't expect a Diary of a Drug Fiend, it's been done before.

Drug dealing is a 'chicago boys' style free enterprise zone that exists in every suburb and city in this country. I write specifically of the illegal drug market, although the line between the legal and illegal worlds exists primarily in the minds and jail cells of the body of lawyers, politicians, reformers, academics, social workers and police officials whose livelihoods depend upon the existence of such laws that separate the good from the bad. It is part of the vast world of the shadow economy that surrounds the legal one just as traditional cultures and old religious ideas surround and infest, and even feed the world of Christianity, that bastion of order, illumination and legality in an otherwise pagan world. Every office of corporate order is the breeding ground of illicit sexual affairs, computer time theft, get rich quick scams by bored minds in thinly partitioned cubicles, secret admirers of the amazing nerve of the scam kings at the top, the bored of Directors. Secret anarchists all.

Drugs, ha, securities rip off, back office deals with the corporate officer on leave of absence to perform a few jobs as a presidential aide. Ed Meese, for example, is Attorney General, bad news for California pot dealers, good news for Afghani heroin importers. If you want to get rich, ya got to play the game. No honest working stiff got anything better than an imitation silk lined coffin. No honest christian soul, good party worker, or faithful of any sort got anything in this life beyond a few comforting thoughts to wear like the baby's security blanket, the blanket at least, was warm.

Dreaming the revolution is about as good as watching it on TV. It's about as relevant as chastising the terrible drug addict for not facing the facts with the correct deluded ideals. It's like the christians arguing over whether Christ is coming next week or next year. Who is going to save you? As it has always been, Anarchy is where the heart is. How you vibe your time in social relations is your own business. If you must associate (and you must) associate freely. The big lie is the world of the system. Scratch any adult and a child waits to be set free. Questions answered?

Gary Rumor - S.F.

P.S. I'm on probation and anything I say can be used against me and probably will.

UNCLE SAM WANTS YOU
TO WORK

• 40 hours a week
• 50 weeks a year
• For the Rest of Your Life!

boarding or skiing. It is like comparing TV soap operas and singles bar/prostitute sex to real social relations.

Granted, dealing with reality requires a great deal of input and risk, but what is the benefit of greater awareness of the dream world of drugs? To refer to drug induced stupor as "another state of mind" is an insult to one's true need for real fulfillment, in the only existing state of mind, which is reality. Again: drug experiences are illusions, and one can no more learn from them than one could drink from a mirage in the desert.

Furthermore, I can't help but feel that the "cool" image of drugs today, like the "cool" image of corporate music, art, and fashion, is just another step to induce submission. Opiates are now the religion of the people, and we all know how much our oppressors love to see us dummy up to anything that would make us feel weak and insignificant.

As for the rest of your magazine, I see a basic contradiction. You protest the unfairness of your jobs, yet refuse to simply quit because you demand a higher standard of living than the majority of the world's population! You demand the money to make others grow your food, shine your shoes, etc. In The Tyranny of Time, Mead-O questions the liberating value of quitting, "unless you possess the personal resources (both monetary and psychological) to transcend the system." Well, whose fault is it that you are so materialistic anyway? Why don't you just turn off the stupid TV and stop running out and buying everything that you've been told will ensure your happiness? You know full well that you could survive on the cash from a half hour's worth of aluminum can collecting each day. Why can't you accept that the only real reason why you must work so much is because you demand so much? Are you in charge of your desires or do they control you? Does your definition of success center around how well one controls one's desires or how well one submits to them?

Perhaps more space in your magazine ought to be devoted to protest of the truly manipulative working conditions which exist primarily overseas. Our problems are nothing compared to those of a laborer in India, an artist under communism, or even the most well educated of blacks in South Africa (everyone must help expose the lies we are being told about "constructive engagement" and other so-called reforms). Hopefully you will find space for this letter, and I am enclosing my address for any who want to respond. I've written a book which I give out in hope of opening intelligent discussion and to trade for the projects of others. Thanks. Bye.

Richard A., Box 16002,
Arlington, VA 22215

64.7%

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Mad magazine
HE post WWII baby-boomers are starting a baby-boom of their own, as no one can fail to notice. My neighborhood was once predominantly inhabited by childless adults. Now three moderate to expensive new baby stores have opened, and for the less affluent, the baby section of the local St. Vincents has expanded by several racks. The parks are full of snuggly laden parents and baby carriages, and a number of new magazines on "parenting" and "mothering" have taken their place beside the magazines for the "new working woman" that appeared in the '70s.

Of course, in many neighborhoods the babies never did stop coming. The preoccupation with children is a novelty mainly for those of us in our late twenties and thirties whose decision to postpone having children followed, in part, a conscious rejection of the traditional setup of our parent's generation.

Many of us who are new mothers have been deeply affected by the feminist and radical movements of the past decades. Because the second wave (post WWII) feminist movement was originally focused on how to get out of the imprisoning role of "housewife," it devalued childrearing to a certain extent. Having children was tantamount to selling out, since there seemed to be no way a woman could preserve her independence if she was bound to the obligations of parenthood.

But for many of us now, the decision to have children does not mean we have turned our backs on feminist values, rather, points to our determination to face the challenge of raising our children without reverting to the traditional primary identity of dependent mother-and-housewife. This means we must find ways of balancing our valued independence with new parental roles and obligations. In particular, it means a much more equal distribution of childcare.*

My own experience in sharing childcare with my partner, described in some detail below, was more complicated and conflict-ridden than the generally accepted feminist convictions on the subject had led me to believe it would be. But it also confirmed what feminists have been saying for years. Our efforts to balance responsibility for child and home gave me more opportunity to pursue outside interests and less cause to resent my child's at times-tyrannical hold over my life. Becoming intimately involved in our baby's needs and accomplishments on a daily basis has provided my partner with a whole range of emotional experience, which Marguerite Duras once referred to as the "explosion of the ego." He has discovered the

* I am addressing the question from the point of view of a heterosexual parent-couple living together, monogamous or not, living communally or not. Obviously, there are many households this does not address. But I am writing informed by my experience. I hope this will not be taken as a plug for heterosexuality or as a condemnation of single-parent families, but rather, if anything, as a call for special consideration and support for people in this situation. I know several single mothers who have made conscious planned decisions, which is I strongly suspect a more healthy environment than unwanted kids in two parent households.
"maternal" generosity that is rewarded so tangibly and directly with the unconditional love and trust of another being, and has gained a more sympathetic understanding of "feminine" roles.

Eroding Gender Identities

Another, more future-oriented reason for wanting our partners to participate fully in childcare is to help our children see beyond gender stereotypes from an early age, and thus be better able to combat them.

Of course, we (and our children as they grow) still confront inequalities that persist throughout society, from wage and job discrimination to judicial tolerance of the physical abuse and intimidation directed against women, to culture and media saturated with sexist imagery. All of these problems have been exhaustively analyzed in feminist writing.†

† In the following discussion I have not dwelt on the broader social and economic changes that have transformed the conditions of family life (e.g., by drawing women into the workforce). This is not because I consider them less important or determinant than the more specific, personal questions discussed here, but rather because they have received more attention and have been adequately analyzed in many other articles (in Processed World, "Roots of Disillusionment" in PW 6 and "Female Troubles" in PW 3). For similar reasons I have avoided a discussion on communal childrearing. Much has been written about the results (usually discouraging) of such experiments. Besides, except for a few cases such as Israeli kibbutzim the issues discussed below are relevant whether or not parents live communally, since in any case biological parents usually continue to have primary responsibility for their very young children.

However, less easily or widely talked about is the fact that these externally imposed conditions are often supported and reproduced by women's own behavior. Recently, some feminists have begun to argue that we cannot understand the persistence of male institutional power over women without delving into the deeply rooted psychological differences that underlie gender. In doing so, they have confirmed our earlier intuitions about the importance of shared child rearing in the early years.

Two authors in particular, Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein argue that the pervasive, underlying mysogyny and the subordinate role of women are strongly determined by the fact that women are, by and large, the sole primary caretakers of children. The intimate and near-exclusive dependent relationship of an infant to her mother creates psychological dynamics that can lead to, or at least reinforce, crippling gender splits.

Generally speaking, men in this culture are emotionally more self-contained, less expressive and "in touch" with the feelings of those around them, yet they have a stronger sense of self than women, who tend to define themselves more in relation to others and have a greater need and capacity for intimacy and nurturing. When these differences become extreme, relations between the sexes grow difficult, and social/political equality is impossible. Men are ruthlessly individualistic, disdainful of women and incapable of the emotional intimacy women desire, while women lack the confidence to become independent subjects in the world at large, and are self-sacrificial yet resentful of men's capacity for detachment and self-advancement.

Chodorow traces these personality differences between the sexes to the differing relationships mothers have to their sons and daughters. Every child must go through a process of separation from their mother, the first step in evolving an identity of their own. For boys, separation and individuation is facilitated by the recognition that they are unlike their mothers, a fact that mothers also underscore by their behavior.

For girls, the relationship with their mother is longer and more intimate and extreme gender differentiation men must participate in the primary care of children. In this way, infants can develop close, intimate ties to both same-sex and different-sex adults.

Dinnerstein sees resentment against women in society at large as stemming from the infant's helpless dependence on her/his mother. In the limited world of the infant, mother is omnipotent, and consequently, she is blamed for anything that goes wrong. Furthermore, when the child strives to be independent he/she resents the continuing need for mom. Infantile resentment and rage initially directed against the power of one woman, turns into fear, anger and resentment against powerful women in general. Like Chodorow, Dinnerstein concludes that men must get involved in childcare early in infants' lives. In this way, negative feelings carried over from infancy will become less gender-linked; women will not be saddled with deeply-ingrained associations of fear and resentment.

Other researchers reject a psychoanalytic approach in favor of models of child development that place greater emphasis on early exposure to gender stereotypes. A recent example of this analysis is Sandra Bem's article in Signs (Summer 1983). Bem argues that children get ideas about sexual identity according to a set schedule of intellectual development. However, the specific ideas they get about sexual identity depends on their observations and experience, particularly of their closest role-models—that is, in most cases, their parents. Sex-stereotyping in children can be avoided, Bem claims, by eliminating differences in what parents do with their...
children, for example, by ensuring that both male and female parents take turns cooking, bathing, etc., and also by providing children of both sexes with similar toys and clothes. In this way, children won't get rigid ideas from society about what men and women can and can't do or be.

Both "psychoanalytic" and Bem's cognitive/environmental approaches agree that gender constraints are forged to some extent by the fact that women do the lioness' share of bringing up children. Seen in this light, getting men more intimately involved in caring for children becomes an important way parents can help their kids get a good start on undermining the sex/gender stereotypes in our society.

But Putting It Into Practice...

This theoretical background influenced me greatly so that by the time my partner and I finally decided to have a child, after years of deliberation, we solemnly swore that childcare would be divided 50/50. We would each get part-time jobs and split domestic/childcare and breadwinning duties in half. I had seen how other friends slipped back into a situation where mom was handed the baby when it needed consolation or a diaper change, and dad was absolved from many primary childcare responsibilities because he was bringing home most of the bacon. I was convinced that we would be different because we were committed to the idea, and both had more or less equivalent money-making capabilities (both of us make a living manipulating keyboards). Moreover, we had close family members nearby who were eager to help with childcare and some savings to help us through the first few months after birth.

I was not prepared for the difficulties in store for us. From the outset, my partner was very devoted and took far more responsibility for our baby than most fathers do. He held her a lot, burped her, and took turns with night feedings. But despite our best intentions, for most of the first year of our daughter's life, he spent a good deal less time with her than I did, and as a result, at fourteen months, she is still more attached to and easily consoled by me. What happened?

The imbalances began well before our daughter was born, in the form of overwhelming prejudice about what makes a good mother. Like many women of my age, I got a lot of my information about pregnancy and childcare from the countless new books on the subject.

Of the three or four most popular books I read, (e.g. The Womanly Arts of Breastfeeding, published by La Leche League, The First 12 Months of Life, by Frank Caplan) every one emphasized the absolute need of infants for their mothers to be with them as much as possible.

The feminist-inspired midwifery movement encourages fathers to get informed and participate in childbirth preparation. But advice on childcare is overwhelmingly directed at mothers and relegates fathers to a secondary role of relief and support for Mom.

In much of the expert literature, mothers are told that babies need the constant loving attention of a single person. Only mother has the instincts and dedication to respond immediately and appropriately to her child's demands. If she neglects this sacred obligation, her child will fail to develop a sense of security and, according to some child development experts, will become insecure and grow fearful of others, or worse. Mothers are advised to postpone going back to work for the first few years, if possible. They are encouraged to breast-feed as long as possible, using breast-pumps or going home during lunch breaks to feed baby if they must work.

That breast-feeding is once again becoming socially acceptable is a good, healthy development. But unfortunately, extraordinary emphasis on benefits of breast-feeding for babies has made it a new standard of good mothering. I have often heard women speak as though the length of time they breastfed was an indication of how devoted they were to their children (La Leche League). The danger is that women will feel obligated to continue breastfeeding "for the good of the baby" beyond the time when it is pleasurable or convenient to them. One friend described to me how resentful she began to feel every time her 8-month old daughter wanted to take the breast. Yet because of social pressures, she kept on breast-feeding for several months.

It is discouraging to find that the enlightened approach to pregnancy and
childcare that encourages self-reliance often goes along with the traditional disregard for a woman's desires for a life beyond baby. This attitude implies a sacrificial attitude towards mothering and idealizes the possibility of mother being the sole provider of any and all of a child's needs and desires.

As much as I recognized these biases and resisted them, I could not avoid lingering feelings of guilt and doubt when I was away from my child. This was reinforced by attitudes of others; when friends or acquaintances saw me without my baby, they would inevitably ask me where she was. At first, before they realized how much time he spent with her, people rarely asked this question of her father when he was out and about. When we were together socially, questions about her were usually directed at me. Many people, especially in our parents' generation, were puzzled or disapproving or uncomprehending of my desires to do things which had nothing to do with babies.

Consequently, every time my daughter was particularly fussy or difficult, I would be afraid I wasn't spending enough time with her, even though I gave her at least several hours every day, and most of the time several days of the week. I finally realized that her fussiness was not caused by my absence, since its pattern didn't coincide with changes in the amount of time I spent with her. On the contrary, I noticed that at times she fussed because I was frustrated or frenzied after an extended time of being with her alone. Moreover, although she goes through periods of clinginess, she is far more sociable and eager to go to others than infants of the same age who spend much more time exclusively with their mothers.

But not all of my difficulties in getting out and pursuing non-baby-related interests were due to social pressures. First of all, the inescapable truth is that during the first few months after my baby's birth I was more prepared to devote a lot of my time and energy to caring for her, and got more pleasure out of it than her father did. Partly this was due to the typically feminine personality traits which, if Chodorow and Dinnerstein are correct, stem from the fact that I was raised primarily by my own mother in my early years. But what these studies downplay is that the physical and psychic connection to the baby developed during pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding helped to prepare me for the intensity of my relationship to our baby in a way my partner could not
experience directly.

In her article "A Biosocial Perspective on Parenting" (Daedalus, 1977) Alice Rossi argues that there is a "biologically based potential for heightened investment of mothers in their children, at least in the first few months, that exceeds the potential for men." She refers to recent research in the field of neuroendocrinology that points to the effects of social stimuli on hormonal secretions, as transmitted through the nervous system. There are many unlearned responses of women to children which, she argues, are physiologically based, (in contrast to the Chodorow-Dinnerstein theory that the maternal "instinct" is first and foremost a cultural construct). Infant crying, for example, stimulates the secretion oxytocin which in turns leads to the nipple erection that occurs preparatory to breastfeeding.

Rossi suggest that these biological propensities affect the ease with which males and females learn to unlearn socially defined values regarding masculine and feminine behavior. It would be interesting to study what hormonal changes, if any, occur in men in response to infants. Rossi's argument is not meant to imply that men and women are biologically confined to their gender roles as they have been established in our society. Rather, it means that we must recognize differences that do exist and find ways of compensating for them. In particular, if our goal is to equalize parental roles and relationships between men and women, we must provide men with opportunities to spend time with small children and to learn how to care for them. This will help close the gap produced by the physical experience of pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding.

As much as I believe that childcare should be equalized, I would not want to sacrifice these uniquely female experiences. The intensity of the first few days and weeks of intimacy with my newborn, and the sensual pleasure I got out of breastfeeding were not only welcome rewards for the drudgeries of pregnancy and childbirth, but incomparable euphoric experiences.

Biological differences have been downplayed in much of feminist literature for fear of giving credence to conservative sexist arguments. But I believe the great changes in society that feminists point to would receive wider audience and support if they were more realistic about the difficulties involved, including an acknowledgement of the biosocial factors.

In my own case, though my partner was devoted and involved, the differences I perceived in his attentiveness and readiness to foresee and respond to the child's needs made me feel discouraged and angry with him. These feelings stemmed largely from my belief, following my reading of Chodorow and Dinnerstein, that there was, in fact, nothing inherent to inhibit equal childcare from infancy.

Once I understood and accepted the (partly biological) basis of my deeper emotional attachment to our baby, rather than trying to deny or discredit it, it became easier for my partner and I to sort out and compensate for our differences and desires.

I wanted my partner to spend more time with our child, but I was ambivalent and uncertain about changing things. For one thing, because of my relatively greater psychic investment in motherhood, it was harder to regain interest and confidence in activities outside mothering. Although at times I felt burdened and frustrated by my daughter's greater attachment to me, there were times when it made me feel very happy and gratified.

At some point in the first couple of months after her birth, I developed a protective attitude towards the baby that tended to reinforce real and perceived inadequacies. I would watch my partner carefully and correct and criticize his way of doing things or admonish him because I thought he was not being attentive enough. My partner responded defensively by denying that there were any differences in our behavior with the child. This led to a kind of vicious circle since the more I demonstrated I knew better, the less likely he was to take the initiative, the more quickly I took over and then resented what I saw as his indifference or inadequacy. The fact that I was always the one who initiated any discussion on the subject made me feel

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Well, it's an OK place to visit, I guess, but I wouldn't want to work there!!
doubly burdened.

All of these elements combined to set a pattern that was difficult to break. I finally recognized that since I was the one most directly aware of and unhappy with the imbalance in duties, it was up to me to sort through my ambivalent feelings and make suggestions for change. My partner was quick to respond when I made my desires clear, and we eventually agreed on general principles and schedules. Once we reached agreement, it was less necessary for me to take the initiative.

Most important in negotiating the transition to more equal childcare was that each of us have specific times of the day or week when we were "on" or "off" duty. I realized that if they spent more time together alone, my partner would figure things out for himself. Unless we had a set schedule it was too easy for me to slip into the main parental role.

As her father spent more time with our baby, he naturally became more interested in her and attentive to all the details of her life. His increasing attachment and delight in her antics were also partly due to the fact that she was a little older, and growing more responsive. I quickly gained confidence in my parenting abilities.

I also came to realize that if my partner handled childcare differently than I did, our daughter would learn to adjust to our different styles. Somewhat less devoted attention from one parent may even be a healthy compensation for a tendency towards overprotectiveness from the other. Although babies do need constancy in care as the experts say, I believe this is somewhat exaggerated. As long as infants receive enough love and their physical needs are met, the opportunity to experience different personalities in a safe, loving environment might very well enhance a child's ability to adapt to the changes they inevitably encounter as they grow up.

Perhaps if we ever have another child, many of the problems we faced this time around will be avoided. My partner will be more knowledgeable about babysitting, and I will be more prepared for the conflicts in store. But I believe we won't avoid some of the differences discussed here, at least in this early period of infancy.

The experience of being a mother and my attempts to prepare for it threw me right up against one of the deepest splits in modern feminism. On one side (represented in this case by Chodorow and Dinnerstein) is the imperative of social freedom and equality of options which has been the most powerful motor of the women's movement. On the other (typified by the feminist midwifery and breastfeeding literature), is the belief, also very powerful, in the inherently (biologically) greater capacity of women for nurturing and unselfish affections.

I have come to see the truths and limitations on both sides. While I don't claim to have resolved the contradictions, I have been able to draw some preliminary conclusions.

The call for greater involvement of men in childrearing is a crucial step in feminist thinking. But the parental experience can never be totally equal as long as women continue to bear children. The struggle for equal child rearing can and should temper the extremes of gender differentiation, especially insofar as they condemn women to a subordinate role in society. However, from my own personal/historical standpoint, I can neither imagine nor desire, that all differences in gender be abolished, as some feminists hope. The concept of androgyny is less appealing to me than some notion of complementarity between genders, which allows for differences in modes of behavior without penalizing either one.

—by Maxine Holz

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PROCESSED WORLD #14
Editor's Introduction

Monica Slade lives, works and brings up her two children in north London, England. She is active in her local Labour Party despite her skepticism about national electoral politics—i.e. about the idea that a new Labour government would bring any significant positive change for working people. She argues that the local party organizations are a ready-made network through which “grassroots” campaigns can be initiated and people informed and organized. In support of this view, she cites the role of the local parties in organizing opposition to nuclear weapons (Labour favors nuclear disarmament, at least on paper) and social service cuts, as well as support for major strikes such as the miners’ last year. This article was originally written for the magazine London Labour Briefing.

Not so long ago, children were an unavoidable consequence of sexual activity. (And in many places, they still are.) A natural phenomenon, totally beyond our control. Like the weather, only worse.

The constant and substantial burden of childbirth and childcare has barred most women, no matter what their race, creed, or culture, from development and achievement in any other field. So bless Mary Stopes and the other pioneers of birth control because it is the very thing, the only thing, that frees women from their traditional, transcultural shackles.

True, our present means of birth control are far from perfect. But whatever their various drawbacks, these are easier to cope with than an unwanted, unloved, unaffordable baby.

Now that we have a choice, we also have to consider what we are doing, and why. To bring a child into the world means a commitment for life. One from which there is no turning back, without causing painful emotional traumas to everyone involved. So it is a decision which we consider very carefully indeed.

Ideology and Reality

Cath Tate, a London Labour Party activist, recently wrote: “Women who want to succeed in politics have first to overcome the dominant ideology that states that our true fulfillment in life comes from being a wife and mother. This is still the main barrier to women coming forward in representative numbers to stand for election.”

This is a load of rubbish! It is a right-wing analysis: isolationist and competitive. Why? Because it blames the individual woman for failing to overcome a problem that is in fact communal. It is presented as a psychological issue, instead of being recognized for the sociological one that it is. There is nothing ideologically wrong with women who choose to become mothers. (What’s the matter, Cath Tate, didn’t you have one?) But there is something practically wrong with a society that doesn’t provide some adequate form of communal
childcare. THIS is THE barrier to women coming forward in representative numbers for anything that demands serious commitment.

**Motherhood as an Act of Political Defiance**

Consider the situation. The world is being poisoned, polluted, depleted, abused and mismanaged on a grandiose and unprecedented scale. Death and disaster will probably follow. Nuclear weapons mean we are also under constant threat of immediate pain and, total extinction. Two thirds of the world’s people are undernourished or actually dying from hunger and thirst. Of the remainder, many are poor, unhealthy, live in unhygienic and cramped conditions, and largely miss out on any further education.

Almost everywhere capitalism rules. The profit-motive is paramount. The interests of multinational companies are served—and fanatically protected—by sham governments whose claims to be the guardians of freedom and democracy are a farce and a fallacy. Why should anyone in their right mind wish to bring children into this lousy world?

Because when we lose the courage to be mothers we are truly defeated in our hearts and in our minds. When we don’t dare to have babies anymore because they diminish our competitiveness, politically and commercially, that is when we really accept the system for what it is and conform to it. It is the surrender of our true and primitive nature to capitalism’s sick rationale.

**Community and Status**

Community: that includes all of us. Many people, mostly women, spend their time and energy caring and providing for those who are unable to do it for themselves. Not only our children, but also our old folk, our sick, and our disabled. On this labour of love and compassion, the whole edifice of human society is built. And yet this work—humble, and menial, carried out unseen in huts and hovels and homes throughout the world—has no status whatsoever. Those who carry it out earn nothing, not even respect. This applies especially to mothers, even in this so-called democratic country where we are supposed to have equal rights. Some say that to have children is ideologically wrong. Others seem to think it is a self-indulgent thing that women do. Still others that we do it because we can’t think of anything else. I say that in having and rearing children we make a substantial and valuable contribution to society. The love and time we give our children will benefit you all. They will do the work when you are too old. They will feed you and pay your bills. They will defend your rights when you are helpless, feeble old fools. The quality of the care we give them determines the quality of all our futures.

Of course, the traditional Right accords some sort of status to motherhood, and this may appeal, or even seem reassuring, to some women. But it is granted only on condition that we are mothers to the exclusion of all else. We must not compete with the men, must not participate in, or gain understanding of, what takes place outside our homes, and are consequently unable to educate our children in political history. This way the poor raise their sons and daughters to accept poverty and deprivation, to be exploited labourers and the mothers of exploited labourers, to take pride in their service, to be soldiers, soldiers and whores.

At Greenham Common USAF base, in a protest against cruise missiles, my six year old daughter and I stood amongst many other women, facing the soldiers and the fence. Directly in front of us stood a row of policemen. "Is that your child?" asked one of them. "Yes," I said, not without a touch of mother’s pride. "It’s not a very good example you’re setting her, is it?" he said disapprovingly down his nose. I answered that I was giving her a political education, a lesson in active democracy. "Ha," he sneered, and moved off. Smug pig. If only his mother had been able to teach him a thing or two about power and democracy, he might not have been there, at that time, in that uniform.

**Discrimination and Isolation**

I hope I have convinced some of you that mothers are dedicated workers in a vital industry. (According to the International Labour Organization, Western housewives spend 3000 to 4000 hours each year on housework and family care. A 35-hour-a-week, paid, unionized job amounts to 1,750 hours a year.) We have no trade union, no national pressure group, no representatives in Parliament to defend our interests. Decisions that affect our lives are taken for us, not by us, and without any form of consultation. This is blatant discrimination. But it is not sexual. It doesn’t happen because we are women. It happens because we are childcareers, and children are not catered for by public life, or allowed to be part of it. In fact, the attitude of our society is Victorian: children shouldn’t be heard, and preferably not seen either. And we mothers are isolated, barred from uniting and organizing, not by any laws, but by the very nature of our work.

When I first became a mother, I didn’t realize this. I spent a lot of time with both my babies, very willingly. I felt it was important for us just to sit around together, play, fight, cuddle, and share food, just...
like monkeys do. It was a happy and personally rewarding thing to do. (If anyone missed out, at that point, it was my husband, who had to work long hours to pay all the bills. As he doesn’t produce any milk himself, we couldn’t swap roles very well either.) But after about 9 months, a baby’s need for the company of other children becomes quite dominant. (And a mother’s need for the company of other adults too!) To my shock horror surprise, there was nowhere for either or both of us to go. There are virtually no provisions for under-threes. Every activity has to take place within the confines of somebody’s flat. Whatever facilities you can provide at home are quickly exhausted by an active toddler. Children who have no neutral terrain on which to meet become competitive and possessive. Each defends his/her sovereignty over THEIR house, THEIR toys, THEIR Mom. Sharing and co-operation don’t come naturally under these circumstances.

To get away from all this, we used to go out to the parks a lot. They are so full of dogshit that you can’t let a toddler crawl through the grass!

After lugging a baby in a buggy, a toddler, two bags and a box of shopping along a mile or two of busy pavement, you’d think a woman would be entitled to a drink, wouldn’t you? Well, we have to drink our pint on the pavement outside, in the cold, noise and pollution. Some pub-owners even allow that. As soon as you stick your face in the door, they tell you to get out because you have a child in your arms that you can’t leave unsupervised outside, not even for a minute.

**Politics of Participation**

But it’s not just public houses (pubs) we are barred from—it’s any public activity at all. Public meetings, for instance, don’t usually provide creches or kids’ corners. So they are difficult, if not impossible, to attend.

Demonstrations are a trial. At a big demo last year there were thousands of us, with our babies and small children. We had to stand in the cold and the drizzle in the wet muddy park for two hours while various leading trade unionists gave long, boring speeches. Even when we finally did move, all the trade union branches went first, so we had to wait some more. Now this might seem a tedious little complaint to the uninformed. But the fact is, that when a small child falls over in the mud (something they do often), it gets wet. And when the child is wet and stays out in the cold, it catches a cold, or worse. Also because the children were hidden by other people’s legs as they ran around, we were all dashing about trying to keep them from getting lost. So even as the speakers were congratulating us on the “encouragingly large turnout” and thanking us for our support, they were making it very difficult for us to stay.

Labour Party activists seem equally unaware of the problems mothers have in participating. This is only my personal experience, but I have no reason to believe it is uncommon: when I joined my local party branch, I became a roadsteward. Every month me and the kids toddled through the street, stuffing agendas for meetings through people’s doors. Sometimes people rang me up, saying: “I couldn’t go to the meeting, what happened?” I never knew. I didn’t go to a single one myself. My husband was out at work in the evenings, the kids were too young to be left alone, and single friends mostly feel they can’t cope with two noisy, snotty-nosed, shitty-diapered, recalcitrant brats, feed them, and put them to bed. No-one in my branch ever bothered to find out why I never turned up, and after a year I stopped being a roadsteward. After that, the only time anyone from the party contacted me was to ask me to bake a cake for a fund-raising stall. Did they think that because I was a mother and a housewife, the only worthwhile contribution I could make to politics was a cake? And if this isn’t prejudice, then what is?

**Childcare, Democracy, and Socialism**

Children are a natural part of our lives; in every aspect—personal, private, social, public, political. I would like to make an appeal to radicals, especially radical men: when you organize a meeting, make sure children can be welcome too. Do some babysitting. Provide some childcare. It may not seem as exciting as going to a demo, raising funds for strikers, or making speeches. But it is just as relevant. Mothers are about 12% of the population, and depend more than most on a decent level of social services.

But if mothers find it difficult or impossible to go to meetings, how can we discuss what is to be done, how can we organize to protect our services, how can we take a significant political action? Mind our children. They belong to all of us. Help us defend ourselves and work for a society where there is a more equal division of labor and resources, a juster distribution of power.

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_by Monica Slade_
HERBERT Kohl became famous in 1968 with the publication of 86 Children, the extraordinary account of a year he spent teaching sixth grade in a "failure factory" Harlem, NY school. In the book, Kohl describes how, confronted with the thirty-six frustrated, embittered, often rebellious young people of the title, he set out to reinvent his role as a teacher by learning from his students themselves what they needed. He started from the assumption that they were intelligent human beings who should be treated with respect, rather than "bad apples" being confined to the classroom-jail until the law released them onto the streets at age sixteen. It has been said that revolutionary discoveries always appear obvious in hindsight, and Kohl's libertarian approach to dealing with "hopeless" kids has proved to be no exception to this rule—nor to the rule that such discoveries, in the absence of the right kind of social momentum, tend to become truisms to which many pay lip-service but which are seldom actually put into practice. Nevertheless, among good teachers—and there are still some—Kohl's name and ideas retain a wide influence.

Throughout the intervening years, Kohl has continued to fight for open, child-centered education in the US, despite the authoritarian rollback of the 80's. He scoffs at the argument, repeated ad nauseum by the mainstream media since they discovered the "crisis" of American education, that "permissive" or open methods have failed. "The so-called open education movement never penetrated more than ten percent of American public schools," he says. "The failure of American education is the failure of authoritarianism, of rigid standards and stupid curriculum, not the failure of openness."

As he reveals in the conversation which follows, Kohl is sometimes bitter about the reactionary triumph in public education circles over the "return" to "basics" and "discipline." But he has not lost hope. Besides writing close to twenty books (with more in the pipeline) and innumerable articles for Learning and other magazines, he has continued to teach children, to train teachers and to explore new approaches to loosening the grip of bureaucratic repression and teacher inertia on the public schools.

It was in this context that we started to talk about computer and learning. Kohl began by remarking with some amusement that he was something of a Luddite in relation to computers. I asked him what he meant.

What is a Luddite?

Well, let's take it historically first, then metaphorically. It starts with a bit of myth. This man Ned Ludd was supposedly a worker in the first "rationalised" industry—textiles—during the industrial revolution in Britain in the early nineteenth century. One day he went crazy and broke up all the stocking frames, destroyed the machinery, because he felt it was destroying his soul. Mechanization, remember, was
throwing traditional craftspeople and small farmers out of work in huge numbers and enslaving them instead—including children, by the way—to sixteen-hour days in the factories and old age at thirty-five. Literally. So the Luddites were a movement of industrial and farm workers that got named after Ned Ludd because they followed his example. They believed the industrial revolution was anti-human, that the new machinery only functioned for the profit of the few and the oppression of the many, and should be destroyed. They were trying to take a stand against the elimination of sensible decent human work by destroying the machinery whose use was eliminating that work. A lot of Luddites also believed—and I think in this case quite appropriately—that these machines destroyed the quality of human work as well as the actual doing of it, so that drudgery and shoddy workmanship were inevitable consequences of industrialization.

Well, the Luddites eventually got jailed and so on and the movement was broken. However—and this is the intellectual sense of Luddism which is much more where I’m coming from—there has been a tradition throughout the last 125 years of people who have tried to take a sensible view of whether any given technological innovation is beneficial to human life, or whether it’s detrimental. And if it’s detrimental, if it’s enslaving or otherwise dangerous, we shouldn’t do it. A perfect example of this for me is nuclear weapons. They are no defense because if they are ever used in any quantity at all, the human race will be wiped out. All they are is a monstrous threat—to everyone. We simply do not need them.

Industry and technology should exist to serve people—people do not exist to serve industry and technology. This is a central theme that has to be elaborated in curriculum, in teaching kids, and in our whole society. Our vision of the future, of what to do with the knowledge we have, has to do with how we design schools—with education. For instance, the name of the magazine Classroom Computer Learning sounds like it’s the computers that are learning. There’s a classroom, and there are computers, and there’s learning, but where are the kids? And is the kids that are the future? When you’re teaching toward the future you try to make life as rich as possible for the children in the present. Every time you make a decision about what you want to change in a curriculum or classroom, you ask: “Does it enrich the lives of the people that use it?” That’s the same perspective we have to take in looking at the microcomputer.

So why did you see yourself at one time as a Luddite in relation to computers?

Well, I started working with main-frame computers in 1956, visiting at an IBM Research Center. Then I worked quite a bit with terminals and main-frames at the Lawrence Hall of Science in Berkeley in the late ‘sixties and early ‘seventies. It was all centralized, controlled from somewhere else, to start with. The software was extremely rigid, it wasn’t “soft” except by comparison with the machines themselves. Also, there was no screen, of course—only a printer and a keyboard. Because of the many users there was a long wait time in the queue, and a short use time. Of course, just being an educational gimmick in the Hall of Science, we had very low priority. Department of Defense-type users could jump right up the queue over our heads. As a consequence of all this, interaction with the machine was low to nonexistent. The machine actually interfered with teaching. It was worse than a textbook because at least you could have the textbook right there as long as you wanted. Kids asked me: “Why should I learn this instead of reading a book?”

What was your answer?

Well, at a certain point I said: No reason, unless you want to go into computer science, as a career. For those kids I devised a course in computing that didn’t use computers—I just developed a lot of games and simulations and exercises in logic, to teach the ideas of computing.

Did your attitude change?

It began to change in 1980 when Ted Kahn enticed me to work at Atari Institute—that was the educational charity Atari set up when they were still making big profits. It’s folded now. Anyway, I started playing with microcomputers. To me, as a teacher, and as someone who’s never grown up, who designs games and toys for children because I want to play with them too—to me microcomputers were magical tools. They were the most wonderful game kit you can imagine. For writing they were a tremendously flexible way to work and refine and revise things. They conferred the ability to have not one solution to a problem, but a hundred, to create your own problems and challenge other people, to share information over computer networks. I also saw them as tools that people in poor communities could have access to, so that they could find ways to organize information for themselves and counter the enormous data bases that corporations and governments use to control them. That’s when I moved from being a Luddite about computers to being something of an enthusiast.

But some things have moved you back in a Luddite direction again?

Definitely. You see, the present school system perpetuates what Jules Henry calls “educational stupidity”—stupidity in a technical and not a street sense. Uncritical thinking, the inability to ask questions, the authoritarian acceptance of things that if examined turn out to be shallowness, hollow, and in many cases false. This institutionalization of stupidity in the schools has now begun to use the microcomputer as its instrument. Instead of being used as paintbrushes, music synthesizers, tools of mathematical invention and intellectual exploration they are being used for the reproduction of this morbid stupidity and dullness.

Can you be specific?

Sure. When I was on the Board at Atari Institute, my main job was to review hundreds of proposals a year from schools all over the country for classroom computer use. I also visited dozens of schools where computers were being used. The proponents we thought were worthy were given computers and/or cash with which to implement their proposals. Most of the proposals were unsolicited, and most of them—close to 90% of them, actually—just translated existing curriculum into electronic form. That is, they fell into one of four categories: drill and practice; rewarding kids for doing boring work with video games; remedial programs to make up for bad live teaching; and “computer skills” programs that were divided into “vocational” use for “dull” kids—word processing and data entry—and programming for “bright” kids. So not only are they perpetuating stupidity
and dullness, they are perpetuating a false and unjustifiable hierarchy among the students. There is no known correlation between ability to pass English or Math tests, and ability to program computers—yet most schools are making success in these so-called “basic skills” the condition for computer access. It’s like saying: “Until you get straight A’s in Math, you can’t take Music.” Worse than that, in many schools, such as the one my children went to in Northern California, Typing is an entry requirement for Elementary Computing: this despite the fact that typing ability has nothing to do with computing. The reason was that they needed work for the typing teacher to do. He knew nothing about computers, hated them, but he got to teach Computing and he was allowed to make Typing an entry requirement.

To get back to how the machines are actually used —
Computers are not being used as computers, in the same sense that books are not being used as real books, tools for free enquiry. Kids don’t read books in the classroom, they read textbooks, which feed them bite-sized chunks of alleged “facts” and “skills” to be swallowed whole, regurgitated at the next test, and forgotten. That’s what I call learning nothing in small increments, which is the basis of most American public education. Now the computers are being used as textbooks and workbooks, with rigid software that tries to enforce the same ritualistic rote acceptance of things that kids don’t believe, don’t comprehend, or don’t care about. “Drill and practice” is a very simple way of saying that microcomputers in classrooms are being used to shore up a system that doesn’t work if you believe in democracy, that doesn’t nurture the children who are its users. Everyone talks about micros being user-friendly, but right now they are not friends of the users. They treat the users as passive victims.

Then they put them on the head electronically now and again...
The kids tell me that M&M’s are better than the computer throwing a couple of colors on the screen and playing “It’s Howdy Doody Time” or “The Star Spangled Banner.” It’s a very inhuman notion of reward. Even for a pigeon—if you want a pigeon to play ping-pong, that’s totally dysfunctional for the pigeon. So you have to reward the pigeon more and more to get it to do the same task. If classroom tasks remain completely boring, they have to be rewarded in a more and more interesting way. Let them play a few video games after all the drill and practice. Pure and simple bribery. But the bribes don’t work because we live in an inflationary culture, and so you have to up the bribe while the intelligence required stays on the same low level, and there’s no learning.

This is where Luddism in the original sense comes in. Kids who enjoy playing piano would never dream of breaking the strings. Kids who love to read consider defacing books a tragic act. Kids who love what they’re doing honor the instrument and tools and materials they use. Conversely, kids who hate what they’re doing, break ‘em. If computers become instruments of torture in the schools—because boredom is torture to young minds, that’s why so many of them hate school so much—we can expect to see them treated in a Luddite manner. Broken. Short-circuited. And computers are so fragile that that’s incredibly easy to do. Like what happened to the “talking typewriters,” the Edison Responsive Environment teaching machines, in the early ‘seventies. I know of a school where the kids loved to screw up the teachers’ programs—jam them, put in a false code, everything they could to make them inoperable. Which meant that computers were inoperable in the lives of those children. Now, there are some teachers who really care—some
who not only care but know, and some who don’t know, but care enough to explore along with their kids. In those places computers are considered precious, like paints and brushes in a good art class.

What do you think about the role of computers in the lives of primary-age children?

I don’t think any five-, six-, or seven-year-old should have anything to do with computers except in a totally informal way. They should be children, they should live in a physical world—the world of objects and music and liveliness—as much as possible. Everybody talks about computers developing cognitive and motor skills because kids can use the joystick and push the button real fast to shoot down Russian rockets. But in the last four years I’ve been to schools all over the country—San Antonio, Chicago, Minneapolis, New York City—and what I’ve seen is kids who are afraid to go into the playground and run! Kids who don’t know how to build houses with blocks because all they’ve
ever done is push buttons to build structures on the computer screen. Little children who are terribly afraid of other little children because they’ve spent all their lives in front of the computer and don’t understand what it is to share a game or build communal lives with their peers.

I’ve also seen young children who believe they have to be adults. It’s ridiculous! Five-year olds don’t have to be adults, they don’t have to prepare for jobs! We should honor their youth and give them a place to grow and be happy. Then they might be decent adults.

As it is, too-early use of computer and TV are combining to produce a desocialization of American children that’s terrifying. If you take a child and parcellize her life so that half the time she’s with the computer and the other half she’s watching TV, what you get is a non-human being.

The role of the teacher then would not be to wear a white coat and manage the system and make sure it doesn’t get broken. It would be to help the kids articulate sensible problems that they were interested in and wanted to solve, and give them a path into the system from which they could get a wider and wider sense of which knowledge comes to bear on the problem that they themselves have learned to articulate.

For example!

Take the question: “Why doesn’t the earth come out of its orbit?” I look up under “Earth,” then “orbit” then “Why?” I get a picture on the screen of the earth in orbit. It says: “How fast do you want it to go?” That’s the beauty of the computer. I can control the shape of the earth’s orbit, the speed, its mass and the sun’s mass, and the force of gravity—and by varying these things, I can find out the point at which the earth flips out of

... too-early use of computer and TV are combining to produce a desocialization of American children that’s terrifying...

What about middle-school age?

Eight to twelve years old is when I would start introducing what I call “utilities.” Things like word processors used the way Teachers and Writers Collaborative in New York used them—the kids each select their best piece of writing for the month, put it on a disc, then have all their classmates review it and file helpful suggestions about it. Then each of them revises their own piece using the suggestions, and everybody together selects type styles and develops graphics and they put it all together and print a magazine. Also mathematical investigation programs in which you can do all kinds of drawing to help you with problem-solving—“supposers” is what Judy Schwartz at MIT calls them, like algebraic supposers and geometric supposers. Introduce artistic drawing programs. Have kids create their own data bases. I would not have the programs structured so the kids start here and go there. I would have an enormous, amorphous world filled with learning that the kids can have access to and make their own maps of. That way they can begin to understand how to build structures of knowledge and use them for their own creative purposes, which is crucial in the development of the intellect.

Want in terms of each of these variables. There’s no better exercise in algebra in the world. To take another question: “Where did the English language come from?” The computer asks me to be more specific. I give it a word and it tells me the origin. Then I start a data base listing the words by origin—Latin, Greek, Anglo-Saxon, Nordic, French. I graph numbers of words by origin, so that I begin to see relative weights. Then it says: “Do you want to go deeper?” Which means the Indo-European roots of the word. From there I could go back up, making trees. I begin to get a sense of the complexity of linguistic development—a linguistic geology.

It would be simple to do that. But what they’re doing mostly in this age group is drill and practice. It’s like using a thousand-dollar computer as a ten-dollar calculator: it’s a trivialization of the technology.

How about junior high and high schools?

There is no question that by that age, kids can be very, very sophisticated with computers. There are some secondary schools where kids use them the way you or I would use the phone. Unfortunately, these schools tend to be in places where a lot of the parents are in the computer industry, or very well-to-do. It’s not a large-scale phenomenon.

The main problem at this level in the schools I’m familiar with is that the computer teachers always find one or two of these kids who are self-taught or whose parents are in the industry, and who know much more than the teachers do. These kids are hardly ever used as the real teachers: they’re seen as threats. The halfway decent teacher will get them out of the classroom by finding them special training, the inconsiderate teacher will get them out of the classroom as “discipline problems.”

Real knowledge of computers is not very often available in the school system because most teachers and administrators are scared to death of them, just like the average citizen is scared to death of them.

So the kids know more than the teachers, if they know anything. And if they don’t know anything, they don’t want to go through another empty learning process. They are sick and tired of what schools have done to them. They don’t want anything new because to them it’s the same old packaging with new colors on it.” “Test me, judge me, put me through drill and practice, but I’m not going to get anything exciting or useful for my life out of it.” The most amazing phenomenon of American secondary education is its ability to make Mozart, mathematics, Norman Mailer, and the creation of cornmeal all the same. Make them into—into cornmeal mush! The most interesting things in the world become equally and unambiguously boring. And now they’re doing the same thing with computers. The idea behind this whole style of schooling is that if we give the kids any freedom, they’ll waste their time and they won’t do what they’re supposed to. So we have to bludgeon them into learning. There’s a complete lack of belief in the imagination, a complete lack of trust in young people. They’re treated as fugitives from the justice of learning.

Are things any better at college level?

That’s where some of the most interesting and creative stuff is being done. In the places I’ve been to, like
Brown and Carnegie-Mellon, and U of M at Ann Arbor, the computers being used by students as another tool for research or personal exploration of all kinds of data bases of other people’s work. It’s giving them the ability to record and process documents, to do sketching and drawing and dimensioning. In fact, the way computers are used in college is the way they should be used in sixth grade. Why should college students have the privilege of doing things well and freely while sixth-graders are enslaved to drill and practice?

What do you think is the relationship between computer skills and jobs?

Very few people are needed to do the creative work in the computer world, in either hardware or software-designing the systems, the chips, and so on. For the rest, they need a few programmers, a few maintenance people—and computer maintenance now just means pulling a chip out and putting another in, it’s far less skilled than installing for the phone company—and some janitors to keep everything shiny and dust-free. We don’t even need people to make the chips here because we’ve got teenage girls doing it for pennies a day in South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, El Salvador. What else? Secretaries. Data entry clerks. Everything. I’ve read essentially that even if on occasion it leads to the illusion of creating jobs, the computer industry is actually creating an unbelievable lack of need for people. The whole drive is toward what they call “expert systems.” [See “Mind Games in PW #13] and the more expert systems you have, the fewer live experts you need, let alone the less skilled people. I’ve already seen kids, good programmers who have just graduated high school, and who find that there are twenty people ahead of them for every job available. The Computer Engineering departments are telling them: “Don’t bother.”

So it’s an absolute lie to say to kids: “You have to learn computers so you can get a job.” I would tell them they’re probably better off learning music or the arts, or how to build a house, or drive a bus, because these are services that people will always need—unless of course there’s so much unemployment that people can’t afford to pay for them! The problem of employment and computers is the problem of employment, period. Learning computing will not solve this problem either for the individual or for society.

But aren’t computers becoming such a pervasive fact of modern life that everybody ought to be computer literate?

I don’t think everybody needs to become computer literate anymore than everybody needs to be airline piloting literate, or bricklaying literate, or astrophysics literate. I think everybody should be politics and Constitution and union and human rights literate, because you need to understand the things that affect your life. You can be computer literate in terms of knowing how to program in Basic—or in machine language, for that matter—and still not know a thing about how computers are used to regulate you, or their effects on society. For most people, learning Basic is like learning to divide by fractions, which I haven’t done since I left sixth grade, and I have a degree in Mathematical Logic! What everyone does need to be is computer sociology and politics literate. That stuff should be taught in Twentieth-Century History, in your Senior year—“Problems of American Democracy,” I call it.

So where is this computer education boom coming from?

Well, partly from the creation of a new teaching profession and a new bureaucracy which controls the new credentials and degrees for those teachers—“Master Teacher in Computing,” “Master of Computer Education,” “Master of Computing Arts” and all the rest of that crap. Then the teachers go back into the schools to take over the computers under the pretense that the students will get jobs, when you know most of them won’t.

I think it’s outrageous to require computer literacy so that people who don’t need or want it won’t graduate from high school and will be penalized in their lives for not caring about it. It’s the flip side of denying computer access to kids who do want it because their grades are too low in English or Typing. A perfect example is my eldest daughter, who fortunately has already graduated. She’s a painter and she wants nothing to do with computers. But she’s not crippled in any way by that, and if she wants that knowledge, she can discover it. Everyone says now that if you aren’t taught something like computers or mathematics when you’re real young, you’ll never learn it. That’s like saying that if you don’t learn how to drive a car when you’re six, you’ll never learn when you’re sixteen. The fact is, you can learn everything you need to know about handling a computer in three weeks when you’re thirty, two weeks when you’re fifteen, and maybe three days when you’re eleven or twelve. It is sinfully in the interests of the computer industry and the computer education establishment to force everybody to do computing. It is not in the interests of the children.

But you talked earlier in pretty glowing terms about what could be done with computers in schools.

Sure. That’s not the same as forcing everyone to learn computer science, though.

Then what skills can best be learned through computer use? What else are they really good for in schools?

Well, to summarize—simulating a complex process or a situation you couldn’t possibly live through. Experimenting with multiple solutions and getting feedback on your mistakes that is not just one-dimensional straight answers but hints and clues that lead in a hundred directions. Producing visual representations of your work you can play with. Creating your own relationships between data. Generating whole class newspapers and magazines, complete with graphics. Setting up electronic mailboxes and using networks to get in touch with other kids in other parts of the country and the world. Those are all capabilities eminently worth having. And kids can begin playing with them around eight to ten years old. The little ones should simply do it in their lives, in their fantasies. You need an active mind first, then the interactive machine can enrich the active mind. That’s the magic.
Translator’s Introduction

The Germans strike again? Maybe it’s the legacy of too much Critical Theory, too much Marx, too much Hegel, too much Kant (or can?). Maybe it’s the lousy weather.

Whatever: this edited-down translation of a piece by Imma Harms, which originally appeared in the West German ecological magazine Wechsel-Wirkung [Gneisenaustr. 2, D-1000, Berlin], tells us some truths about how “innocent” toys can be used as seductive tools of social control and forced socialization.

But something about the piece did not sit right; in fact, two things. One: children have two genders. Do girls play with LEGO and such things differently than boys? When a girl puts down a doll and picks up a LEGO piece on her way to constructing some sort of flying/digging/moving/living/talking thing—does this mean something different than when a boy does it? Mebbe so. (What was that computer programmers’ sister up to, anyhow?) The old norms say, girls don’t build; they take care of the builder when he falls down. LEGO can be an instrument of revolt against an old norm.

Two: The author just begins to get at this at the end, but it needs more emphasis: playing with toys (or just living) in a world made up of abstracted roles and empty rules does not automatically produce empty and abstracted people. At least there is no guarantee that that will happen. Kids can play with LEGO, and then they go out and squat houses, close down nuclear power plants, give stony greetings to the likes of George Bush, etc.

Ohne Zukunft for ever—The Datadybbuk

The West German government is worried about its citizens’ stubbornly bad attitude towards hi-tech. It still looks like lots of people don’t want to believe that their future is tied to data processing and microelectronics, “in prosperity and hard times,” as the Club of Rome put it. So the conservative Christian Democratic regime has begun to plan a cultural offensive aimed at “motivating people” to deal with the new information and communication technologies, beginning with the elementary school system.

This doesn’t mean that every child should learn BASIC as their first foreign language. The state is much more concerned with the basics as a whole, of preparing the next generation for the “insertion of information technology systems into different areas of life and work.” According to the government, success in the future requires a “systematic application” of the “basic principles” of the new information order—“digital information ordering, the translation of real activities into a machine-readable program”—at the elementary school level.

Finding Beauty in the Abstract

What are these basic principles, then? Seymour Papert, in considering the question in his
book, *Children, Computers and the New Learning*, gives us some illuminating glimpses of what's in store. Papert takes the work of the Swiss child development psychologist, Jean Piaget, and turns it on its head. Piaget distinguishes between a child's acquisition of "concrete" and "formal" thinking. According to Piaget's logic, a child is taught only "concrete thinking" in the early years, thinking that is visual, qualitative and directly linked to the sensual world. Only later, when a child begins school, does Piaget suggest the introduction of more abstract or "formal thinking," thinking that is analytic, quantitative, mediated.

With the arrival of the computer on the scene, rejoices Papert, it is now possible to organize "formal thinking" so that children who are still at the age during which they learn intuitively, spontaneously and through direct perception, swallow it down as "concrete thinking." When other children learn "that is a tree, this is a green, that is hot," Papert's children would learn, "Right 90-SQ/Right 30/TRL/ at completion come to a house." This is a style of thinking in which every perception is fragmented into programmable units. It is to take place at the point of a child's development, according to Papert's re-working of Piaget, where "an intuitive science of quantity and system would be erected." Children, writes Papert, would learn "to find beauty in the abstract."

It's no surprise that many [German] parents, including those in the "progressive left," worry about the connection between computers and their kids. "What kind of relationship is this," writes one parent, where opposite the child is a thing "without voice, without face, without age, without sex, without a fate, without smell, without body, an ever-emotionless slave of reason... Does one learn rational self-discipline or in the long run does one learn self-destruction, the expulsion of all personal feelings in every realm of production and social life?"

But why are these same parents so naive when it comes to other, much older methods for producing Papert's children? Every kid's room is filled with them. The most modern toys—one can only call them "playing systems"—carry the imprint of the computer culture.

The Unbounded World of a "Play System"

The classic and most widely distributed is LEGO. It does exactly what Papert wants: a world—the world—gets built out of standardized units. The concrete is synthesized out of the formal. And if at times it only has a vague connection to real life, nonetheless the child learn that the more abstract the building block, the more varied things can be built.

Not coincidentally, LEGO advertising makes remarkably similar points to Papert's call for kiddie computers. Individual LEGO pieces "represent nothing in themselves, but assembled they can represent anything under the sun—and more! The boundary is set by the limitless imagination of the child." So says LEGO. Papert writes that "there are an infinite number of possible shapes that a child could program onto a computer screen, but each time they would learn "to exercise control of this incredibly rich 'microworld.'"

Fifty million children in 125 countries play with the colored knobby blocks, but this unusually successful toy didn't develop out of normal kid's building blocks. The Danish firm that makes LEGO toys used to build only wooden toys, mostly trucks, until the second World War. The plastic "bricks" were the trucks' cargo. After the war, these injection-molded blocks were expanded into a "play system" accompanied by a lavish advertising budget and the full repertoire of modern mass marketing techniques. Throughout Europe children fell in love with "LEGO—a system for playing," as it was described.

The clean, interlocking blocks, the smooth walls, the totally rational toy seemed to satisfy something in the children (or was it their parents?) that made LEGO more than a fad. The toy's message sank in: if one piece was missing, it was exasperating. Either the construction was perfect, or it was botched. A computer programmer explained to me that, as a child, he always used to get angry when his sister used the different colored LEGO pieces without any logic to it, mixing up the colors wildly. He always put them "in order" afterward.

The Cultural Heritage

Wrote one child psychologist: "A toy is an important tool for education and training, in which the child gets the feel of the cultural heritage of his or her time."

What does a child learn with LEGO, and what are they supposed to learn?
It's not just that it's easier to put the blocks together with LEGO than with other similar toys. It's also that there is no choice but to put the blocks together: one can do no more than build in this "orderly" sense. The knobs on the top of one fit into the base of the next; smooth walls, sharp diagonals, square forms get built. With LEGO, to build means to build according to exact rules. It doesn't feel like a constraint, because the rules are built into the blocks themselves; the rules were fixed once and for all in the production process. What is experienced "at play" is what's left within these boundaries. The modeling of the real world during playtime is thus made into an improved multiple choice test.

The Modular Technique

LEGO also embodies a principle of construction based on the use of modular building elements. With standardized building pieces, it doesn't matter if what is being built is a garage, a helicopter, a cow. Piece after piece is stuck together, everything gets bricked up. This technique, based on the module, the dominant characteristic in all parts of society. It is the "cultural heritage" within which children play, when they play with LEGO.

We find this technique in housing construction based on prefabricated materials, in all modern equipment manufacture, in containerized freight, and in an especially pure form in software techniques and complex programming systems. Here, the module is a necessity; nothing happens without it. The parallel is astonishing.

The great advantage of modular technology is that "it constructs out of components what they all have in common—they can be combined, taken apart, and put back together in a new form." That's how LEGO is advertised.

"Through the step-by-step assembly of components and the use of existing ones, new levels of abstraction emerge. The raw material for the creation of the elementary components," (LEGO advertisers would complete this sentence) "is developed out of synthetic plastics." However, this is not LEGO advertising copy, but from an essay discussing a complex programming language called ELAN. The sentence continues, "The raw material for the creation of the elementary components are objects and structures of program languages now in use."

Modular technology precedes system programming. One lecture about data structures and programming notes that it is best to "employ the established principle that from a few simple components, based on a few, well-thought-out assembly options, complex structures can be erect-
ed." LEGO's top managers could have said the same thing.

Or this: "Modern modular systems are based upon a system of building blocks. The user can locate the desired parts, and, according to his production requirements, put them together into a total system." This is not about toys, but the use of "modular programs for industrial production systems."

The basic parallel is in the underlying logic, namely, that with an appropriate basic component—here a programming language, there a knobbed building block—every problem can be solved, every figure constructed. In computer programming, reality is seen through the frame of numerical logic and the languages built on it; in playing with LEGO, reality is seen through the frame of the "language" and logic of the standard LEGO block.

The future needs these kinds of people! A society of programmers. That is what children who play with LEGO learn. They not only build with modules, they become modules—that interlock, like the little wheels inside an old mechanical calculator.

Breaking Through the Module: Bringing the Pieces Together

"A toy," writes Bernhard Kroner, is a "symbol of the required ways of behavior. In this sense, a toy is a means of social control." The question is, what would protection against the misuse of formal logic look like? The protection lies partly in the nature of the real world. Ours is a world of quality, of the unique, of the imprecise and the contradictory. The real world is a world of continuity, and of the inconceivable.
Ordering this chaos through a logic of quantity and system is only one possibility; and the result is an artificial world.

Ordering this chaos through a logic of quantity and system is only one possibility; and the result is an artificial world.

A child finds all these worlds inside worlds mixed together. She will find elements of chaos, and elements for its mastery, whole layers of different cultures and of technologies. Everything leaves its traces, its 'cultural heritage' of the time. A child can choose and bring together what is important to her, what seems to belong together. A child can break down old connections, and make new ones. This is her own source of autonomy.

Somewhere in all this, LEGO finds its place. For certain, there is one thing that we can do better with LEGO than just about any other toy: build walls.

—by Imma Harms
translated by The Datadybbuk
THE COWL OF MONDAY

I did not expect to see the sun rise today
I expected to see a thousand blue owls
Flying through the rain
Coming to blanket me with gloom and silence
And veils of an aged dream

Instead I see gold light on the bricks
The song of the sparrow dripping from new leaves
The streets vivid with young shadows

Thin columns of mist still linger
From the haunted landscapes of sleep
Slowly, the morning rituals unfold themselves
From my hands: uncertain of my faith
In secular dimensions, I try to anchor
Myself with formula actions
Hoping to discover the right incantation
The proper gesture, the spell not found
In any grimoire

In the dawn I see other colors
Violet and pink, pearl silk and mystic gold
Cool music, her spectral flesh
Cathedrals of April
Cities rising from the hallowed night
The rain back to legend
Blue owls waiting
In a forest beyond prayer

—by G. Sutton Breiding
in A Clerk's Journal

HELIOUM REFLECTIONS

Memories of summer Sunday

helicopters rising from the magic garden
and Emma
in lingering skirt
posing for a photograph
by men of iron
harder
so much more than she expected
—by C.K. DeRugeris

AN ADULT HAMBURGER (understands romance)

An adult hamburger
built to fit an adult mouth
times millions,

with some greaseless home fries
for those seamless new thighs.

You utter your one word of Italian
at the beverage counter

and invent your own salad
named after yourself.

An adult hamburger
for a mouth that's been around
times millions of blocks,

with your choice of cheese toupees
on an art deco tray.

An assertive, ambitious, achiever
of a burger, a hamburger
out to have a good time.

—by Kurt Lipschutz
HE SAID THE HOMECOMING

wasn't like any
fucking war flick
parade no confetti
or trumpets the
cabs on strike
after JFK upstate
on West Allen
old brownstones
torn open for
cement he said
a girl with long
ironed hair spit
seeing his uniform
medals in the
bottom of the
suitcase he said
I got near my
brother's called
said this is
Tom, he said Tom
who? Jesus fucking,
your brother. I got
a room mate now
Ray says but I
guess its ok
for you to
stop by

—by Lyn Lifshin

THE PALACE REVOLUTION

The mad queen broke the mirror with a curse,
set her heart against a silent mountain,
and pelted her ghosts with our produce.

In the morning she was locked
in the wine cellar,
and the stern Administress of the Interior
promised a reign of order and terror.

We are saved. We are lost.
Already the factions foment.
Long Live the Queen! the old men remember
fondly the incitation of wilderness eyes.
But the crowds yell: Infrastructure Now!
to the diggers of canals, pavers-over,
and mechanical engineers.

In the underground airport, business
travelers and refugees mingle and lose
their luggage like always.

The men are frightened. The women
are like the men.
Now is the time to buy.

—by Barbara Schaffer

traitors

no room in this mirror for both of us
your armored thoughts have got to go
your forearms scarred with tattooed hearts
your epaulets with bars
you can stay hard for a longer time
(I can stay sad forever)
& glide through strangers' paradise
with the same familiar hells

"here... this is where the bullet pierced,"
you said, "did you know I killed a man?"
you flew in the air force
I marched on dry land
you got a medal (I got a suntan)
& parched ribs on napalmed sand
"waves," you wept
"cold as glass hands
pulled this country down"

no room in this mirror for both of us
no room to swim or drown
these are the fingers that trigger your passion
& set your flesh on fire
& these are the fingers that push the buttons
that send us all to hell

I can see love go up in smoke
you see clear blue sky
shrapnel tides on moonlit nights
bombard our asphalt pride
with one more bone to fill the hole
& one more back to knife

—by William K. Maximin

NOW WE ARE SIX (or rEAl liFE pOeM # .01)

andrea asked alice
"what is the Fourth of July?"
alice said "Fireworks day"
"but do you know what it means?"
asked andrea
"No", said alice
"it's the birth of our nation"
"How old is it then?" asked alice.
"208 years old"
"It should be dead by now", said alice.

—by Julia Barclay
A DAY IN THE LIFE OF EMPLOYEE 85292

THE acrid aroma of warm ketchup and vinegar revives me as I step into the cool rose-hued early morning air. I crawl into my tin-plated subcompact and rev the engine into a dull roar. I'm gliding onto the Nimitz Freeway, past the ketchup factories and canneries, past the "outdated" industrial plants, the factories and warehouses. Past the abandoned bus factory, where rusted engines and bus chassis' lay strewn over the yard. Past the truck plant employee parking lot, once a dense concentration of pickups and chevs, now a desolate landscape of tumbleweeds and beercans. I'm cruising over the San Mateo bridge and veering south, into the future. The signs say Palo Alto, Mountain View, Sunnyvale but I'm reading Silicon Valley on each one. No more smokestacks, no more peaked tin roofs. Instead we have "university style buildings." Flat roofs. Rolling lawns. I pull into the parking lot of Hewlett-Packard's Santa Clara Division, slowing down to flash my badge to the guard on duty but not really bothering to stop. Why waste precious time? We receive a notice on this once a month. "All employees must come to a full stop and show the guard their badge." For our own safety and security of course.

I walk across the vast parking lot in the slanting morning sun clutching my paper bag of lunch. I remember my first days at HP being ridiculed for bringing my lunch in a tin bucket, like everyone did at the factory. HA HA, where do you come from? It reminded people of Fred Flintstone and Barney Rubble going to work at the stone quarry. Here we bring lunch in paper bags. That's progress. I show my badge to the guard at the desk and walk into the stale conditioned air of building 2A. My building is only one of five at this division employing almost 2000 people. The building is a sea of modular partitions and workbenches. I mumble my hello's to the technicians at their benches hunched over their data books, catching up on a little sleep. I wave hello in the direction of the women assemblers, already perched over their chassis's, trying to remember what goes where. I make my way to my bench, mechanical assembler position, a fifteen foot long bench with trays and trays of nuts, bolts, screws, washers, and hardware stretched out before me. A pile of tools at my elbows. I quickly take off my jacket and rumble my tools around, coughing and clearing my throat. To announce my presence. There are no time clocks to punch here so you are clocked in by the several busybodies who make it their business to see when you come in. The eyes and ears of the supervisors. If your jacket is still on, it means that you just walked in the door. I make a short trip to the main coffee dispenser in the main building. Got to start waking up. I stare at the skeleton of an instrument before me on my workbench. Where did I leave off? It starts coming back to me and I slowly start piecing the skeleton together, destined to become yet another Hewlett-Packard Fourier Analyzer. Nothing to look forward to until 9 o'clock break. The morning is a blur of humming fluorescent lights and luke-warm coffee. I am lost in my work until, finally, the break trays are spotted rolling down the aisles. It's Tuesday, cookie day. I see the forewarned are already heading the cart off at the pass, grabbing the best cookies. The cart arrives and two pots of coffee and the tray of cookies are placed on our rack before rolling off to distribute to other break areas. A line is quickly formed and we grab our rations and join our respective social circles to talk and gossip. I edge into an assembler station and talk with some friends.

"Where's Ellen today?", I ask the group.
Marie perks up, "You didn’t see her get the escort yesterday? She got canned yesterday about 2:30."

"What?!" I shout in disbelief. I lower my voice instantly and everyone looks nervously around. "Why?"

"That bitch of a lead didn’t like her. Probly cause she’s black. I talked to her last night. She’s glad to be out of here, she was sick of this place."

"She really needed this job though," says Becky. "It’s hard to find work these days."

Everyone nods.

"She’ll find something," says Marie. The conspiracy of the five of us talk quietly, making sure one of the supervisors, or their eyes or ears aren’t listening in. We all keep smiles on our faces. HP, you see, doesn’t have layoffs. Never. There’ll be no unemployment insurance for them to pay. Coincidentally, when the economy goes sour, there seems to be a rash of firings. In the afternoon, there’ll be a tap on the back, a quick trip to personnel, and out the door without one chance to say ‘goodbye, I’m fired.’ Not one chance to tell your coworkers what’s happening or exchange phone numbers. Spiriting people out the door like that makes most people feel they’re to blame themselves. Most are too embarrassed to even come back for their belongings.

"I was just getting to know Ellen, too bad," I mutter to myself.

And then, much too soon, break’s over. We all saunter back to our work stations.

I’m up to my elbows in hardware. I’m assembling frames for instruments. Assembling the chassis, installing the transformer, the switch assembly, the fuse-holders, the lights and LED’s, the card-holders. I’m installing the mini box fan, to keep the instrument cool and calm. Me and these fans have a history. I got tired of watching the heavy solder smoke curl up the women’s nostrils over in chassis wiring area.

"How can you stand breathing that stuff all day long?" I would ask.

"HMM, oh, you get used to it," Mae said. She ought to know, she’s being working for HP for thirty years now. One of the few who still remember Bill and Dave hanging out the Christmas checks.

"It’s really bad to breathe that stuff you know."

"Oh, everything is bad for you these days."

Mae is the tough, loyal old-timer type. The other women on the line detested breathing fumes all day long however. So, I started requisitioning extra box fans from the stock room, since my job enabled me to procure spare parts for repair work. I would wire the little fans and put them on the workbenches and they would at least blow the solder smoke away from the nostrils. Soon, everyone wanted a little fan of their own. I was having a hard time filling orders. All was well for several months when, boom, our breath of fresh air died. The management caught on to our poor judgement and misuse of company assets. Fans were for cool and breezy instruments, not for assemblers faces. The fans were rounded up and herded back into the stockroom. No one, it seemed, really knew where those little fans came from all wired up like that though. Mysterious.

At one of our little department meetings, I requested ventilation for all the employees benches. Sherry, our new supervisor, was horrified. Supes were rated on keeping department expenditures down. She smiled benevolently, after regaining her composure, and chided us little children for asking for exorbitant luxuries like ventilation. Sherry was a new hire fresh from Stanford who had never worked a day in her life before now, yet here she was telling the electronic facts of life to people who have been working in the industry for many years. No one, however, backed me up on my proposal after she ridiculed it like that.

Around a month later, Mae came back from a three week vacation, all tan and relaxed. Her second day back on the job she came in furious.

"Do you know, Sherry, that I’ve had blisters in my nostrils for as long as I can remember. They actually went away while I was on my vacation. I could actually breathe properly. Do you know that one day back on the job and they’re back again! It’s that damn solder smoke, I’m sure of it. We must have some vents in here!"

Sherry’s face was a flustered pink while Mae continued her story to all the women in the area as they sat around the big table wiring chassis. Big festering sores in her nose for twenty-some odd years and never placed the cause.

On break time I wrote up a petition demanding ventilation and everyone quickly signed. I xeroxed it and left it on Sherry’s desk. I told her I’m giving a copy to the area manager. She was in a panic. Letting rebellion spread is an unpardonable offense for a supervisor. Several days later, installation people were installing a central vent with individual scoops for the work stations. Sherry’s hatred of me stems from this day.

I’m installing a cable harness and sub-assembly which comes from yet another area. Now it’s ready for the wiring people to take. It will take them about eight hours to wire just one of them. I go back to another chassis and repeat the same steps. I work automatically, grabbing the right crinkle washer, the right locknuts, screws, tinners. Working miniature little nuts into the tiny space between the transformer and the frame. What a pain. My hands fly from tweezers to screwdrivers, to needle pliers to wirecutters, solder irons, solder suckers, crescent wrenches, allen wrenches, bus wire, the tools of the trade. I’m like an automaton. I know this particular instrument well so I can dream and still work. I listen to the chatter of the technicians behind me. I catch snatches of their conversation: the 49ers, some asshole of a referee, Willy Nelson’s concert, some blonde in a ferrari... I see Louie hunched over his work station. He’s strapping a just tested laser on the vibration board. Straps it down with a big black rubber strap.
Turns on the motor and it shakes, rattles and rolls with the sound of an outboard motor. They build these lasers tough. Louie shuts the motor off and prepares another one. Last week Louie was walking the line between getting fired or electrocuted. The company had been talking for months of the dangers of static electrical damage to delicate CMOS parts. Just think of it, miniature lightning bolts at our fingertips, this static electricity. They corralled us all into the conference room for a thirty minute film on the danger. We saw crashing F-111's all for the sake of a burnt out little CMOS chip. Sounded like a good idea to me. A little later we were all handed a big black mat that was electrically grounded to our workstations to protect these chips. No more coffee cups at our area as styrofoam is a harbinger of these dangerous electrical charges. Certain fabrics were not allowed to be worn to work. Then they handed us all little bracelets with straps to strap ourselves to the tables. To ground ourselves to not damage the chips. Amazingly enough most people did not want to be leashed like dogs to their work stations. To the assemblers it was an insulting thought, but to the technicians it was like telling them to stand in a puddle of water and stick their finger in an electrical socket.

Louie expressed his fears to me. "I spend my whole technical career trying to remember the old axiom of never grounding yourself and they ask me to do it voluntarily. I work with 10,000 volts on the power supply of this laser. One slip and I'm cooked meat with this grounding strap.''

Louie is a quiet guy. He agonized privately over this dilemma for several days, disturbed that all his coworkers saw no problem with the arrangement. One afternoon he exploded into a tirade against the grounding strap, pointing out the dangers to his coworkers. Seems no one had really thought about it. They all trusted the company’s engineers to think it through and make a good decision. They all saw Louie’s side and agreed unanimously to refuse to use the strap. They scheduled a meeting the next day with the big boss who also agreed it was a stupid idea. Seems the office people had been sold on all this stuff by the marketing group. Sounded reasonable to them as they never work on electronics. That was the end of the "Leash Law." Louie retreated back into his shy little corner again.

I see Mike and Pam winding their way through the burn-in area, coming to get me for lunch. We join the stream of the hungry in the aisle and walk up the stairs and through a long sunlit corridor to the cafeteria. We take our trays outside, for some fresh air. Some people are playing volleyball at the net stretched across the courtyard area outside the cafeteria. The famed silicon valley recreation area. This isn’t a factory, it’s a country club. Actually, you’d be a fool to use your thirty minute lunchbreak to bat a ball around. You eat, talk a little and it’s back to work. The people who play volleyball are either on a diet or have no lunch money. I suppose the engineers could play volleyball in between designing new technology but I’ve never seen them. They go to their private health clubs that are scattered throughout silicon valley.

We gossip and bullshit about who’s been fired, how we managed to go off today and who’s been getting it on with who. The latter is a very popular item for discussion as the plant is half male and half female. Fertile grounds for a thriving Peyton Place. We plan our upcoming weekend. Before we know it it’s time to troop back down to our workstations. It was nice seeing the sun as there’s no windows in the building downstairs. No distractions. Groups of us are drifting back to work, a parade of happyfaced clones. We all wear painted smiles. All one big family. Management wears shirts with the sleeves rolled up and no ties. That’s their uniform. Most have no doors on their offices. They have the “open door policy” here. We refer to that policy when they fire someone. “They open the door and throw them out.” When I was first hired, at a different HP facility, my boss told me, “You don’t come here to make money. You come here to make a contribution. We don’t discuss wages here with each other, that’s strictly personal.” I remember my final interview with this guy, my original boss. With his pen he wrote these letters in capitals for me. M-E-R-I-T.

"This is the key to your success here," he told me. "Merit—not seniority like union jobs or cost of living or stuff like that. That's the old days." I noticed he had a pack of Merit cigarettes sticking out of his breast pocket. What a loser this guy is I thought as I shook his hand happily and agreed on my future career with HP. I had lied about my work history. I knew I couldn’t tell him that my last job, before I was laid off, was a lumper with the Teams—

We were sent to a big introduction to the company, to “see the garage” as they say. It was a four hour media extravaganza with a talk by some VIP, a slideshow, and a big presentation by personnel on “The HP Way.” The garage was the highlight of the slide show, the garage being the place where Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard built their first instrument, an oscillator for the Walt Disney production of “Fantasia.” I was fully indoctrinated by the end of these four hours and found myself becoming an android for Bill and Dave. I kept trying not to think about the time when Dave Packard was Undersecretary of Defense for Nixon at the time of the Vietnam War and a group of us lit fire to the hotel he was speaking at. The flames were licking around the hotel and we could actually see Packard and his buddies at the top of the hotel. We all chanted “Pig Nixon, you’re never gonna kill us all” as we blocked the arrival of the firetrucks. It took several squads of riot
cops to break us loose and send us scattering into the balmy Palo Alto night. That was a long time ago however.

My first place of employment at HP was phased out of existence as they moved to their Santa Rosa facility where the wages were cheaper. They started moving regular employees to other worksites and bringing temporary workers in to take their places until production was halted for good. Almost every temporary was black. That was weird. There were 1 or 2 black employees out of several hundred people in my area. HP claims its racial percentage is better than average. HP is a very large employer for the area and obviously hires very few blacks. This leaves a lopsided percentage to look for work as temporaries. My boss explained it to me at one “Beer Bust.” This is where they roll out a few kegs of beer and some hot dogs to express their appreciation of us.

‘Blacks aren’t good workers,” my boss explained to me, quickly looking around making sure no one was in earshot. He was quite delighted at sharing his little philosophy with me, an obviously sympathetic white man. “They’re just trouble makers, we prefer the orientals.” The plant was full of Filipinos, Vietnamese, and Mexican and Latin Americans. Not Chicanos but green card workers. HP ensures its workforce will be people not in a good position to make “selfish” demands on the company.

I arrive back at my bench. It’s time for “button up.” I receive a finished instrument from the technician after it’s been assembled, wired, and burned in. (Ran in a hot box for several days.) It’s now ready to get the final covers on it. I bring it over to the button up area. I fill in the forms for shipping/receiving and check the instrument for damage or paint chips. I clean the unit up. Put it on a cart and I’m off wheeling this new machine to the stock room. None of us assemblers really know what these things do. We only know it goes with a bunch of other instruments, a computer, a CRT screen and a keyboard and costs around 200,000 dollars. Occasionally we see who buys them. General Motors, Lockheed, the Swedish Air Force. They are Fourier Analyzers. That’s not the only thing we make here though. Within these five buildings we produce hundreds of different instruments. From lasers to custom integrated circuits. I wheel my cart around into the stockroom and dump it on another table. Will comes and checks it off on his list. Will is a different breed of employee. Most of the workers here are young, Will is in his fifties, from the old school of electronics of electron tubes and military jargon. He’s head of the HP garden club. There is a several acre lot

outside the building that has been plowed up and fenced in. It was divided into about 50 parcels of land. We could sign up for one of them and grow crops on it. I signed up as I love gardening and could use some fresh vegetables. Several days a week I would join scores of others filling out to the garden to hoe, plant, and water in the slanting afternoon sun, the HP monolith hovering in the background. The scene brought to mind a post-1984 nightmare, serfdom of the future. Working in the plant all day and growing your crops outside. It just lacked the barracks to sleep in. Our crops were coming along OK. At least I thought so. From the front of the garden, with the factory in the background my cucumbers and tomatoes were doing fine. Most of my plot went to corn though. I noticed that as I walked into the corn patch the closest rows were lush and green, but as I walked closer to the factory, the plants were sickly and yellow and the last third of them had not even come up at all. I thought at first that I was just lazy and not watering the rear as much as the front, but one day I took a sweeping look of the whole HP garden club and noticed that a giant line of sickly yellow had been drawn down the width of the garden plot. One third of the garden was poisoned! Then I realized that the whole plot of land that stretched from the garden plot to the building had not one blade of grass or weed on it. We were gardening on the edge of some sea of poisonous chemicals! I was thankful that I hadn’t carried home a load of chemical soaked vegetables to my wife who was pregnant at the time. I pointed this chemical sweep out to the garden club officials, but they thought it would still be OK to eat the vegetables that survived the chemical holocaust. That was the end of my green thumb. I let my poor garden shrivel in the sun.
I'm back at my bench again, assembling, assembling, assembling. I've run out of excuses to leave my bench. I've gotten parts out of the stockroom, I've delivered to the stockroom, I've gone to the bathroom, I went to get some more shipping forms. I've accepted the fact of working till the afternoon break. It's amazing what you will get used to. You do develop some pride in your ability to do simple things. I can assemble these things very fast when I want to which is not very often. Me and one other woman are the only ones who know how to assemble these things. She trained me as she will retire in several years. Bess has been doing this job for almost thirty years, another old-timer. I was asked to document the assembly of this product as I learned the procedure, but I stopped after a few weeks. We're more valuable this way.

Second break. More coffee comes rolling down the aisle. I grab a cup and I'm off at a fast pace to visit some friends in another building. It's about a 3 minute walk to get there and I only have ten minutes. I run past the stock area, past the machine shop, past the degreasing area with its vats of steaming chemicals. I walk into the vast Printed Circuit Board area. There's about 50 women sitting in front of little racks of Printed Circuit boards, loading them up with capacitors, Integrated Circuits, and resistors. Pairs of reddening eyes look up from their giant illuminated magnifying glasses and microscopes. I see my friends, Laura and Rose standing up and stretching in the walkway. Laura had worked with me at my last jobsite for HP and transferred here also. We go out the back door and cross the parking lot to smoke a joint in Rose's car. Both complain of their supervisors. The printed circuit area is a very harrassed area. Lots of bickering and quarreling. The stories they tell remind me of the movie "Caged" where the matronly women jailers harrass and torment their prisoners, mostly young women. We finish the joint and run back to the building. I still must reach my area in a matter of minutes. Being a few minutes late from break time can be an excuse for a lousy or no pay raise come review time.

It won't be long now. The final stretch of the afternoon has begun. My eyes are fatigued. My fingers are trembling from dexteriously manipulating hardware all day. I'm bored to death. I've run out of reminiscences, sexual fantasies, and daydreams. I think of what I'm going to do tonight. The early risers are starting to drift out. Our "flextime" enables us to come to work within a two hour time slot, work our hours and leave. Sometimes I appreciate this flexibility, but I really miss the power I felt working in the factory when we all arrived en masse to take control of the machines. Even as wage slaves, there is something very powerful when a shift of workers leaves the production lines at the same time and march out of the plant together. Something that reinforced and gave the impression of unity and solidarity. Here, in silicon valley, they have us believe that we voluntarily come to work on our own accord and at our own convenience. What a joke.

Finally I have five minutes to go. I start cleaning up my area. Put away the tools. I nod goodbye to my co-workers. "See ya tomorrow, take it easy." I'm out the door. Fresh air, how great. Cars are revving up and twisting out of the parking lot. I check the paint on my car. A few rust spots, that's all. A few weeks ago it was discovered that the ventilation system was fouled up and raw chemical fumes were being emitted from the "smoke stacks." It had stripped the paint off of 300 cars and HP paid for new paint jobs for all of them. At first I thought how generous, but what other damage had been done? What did it do to our lungs or the lungs of nearby housing tract neighbors? New paint jobs were, I guess, a small price to pay. I was surprised that not one thing about it appeared in the newspapers. Electronics is such a "clean" industry. But then many stories I've heard about chemical dumping and poisonous fumes never appear in the papers.

I cruise out of the parking lot and join the crawling freeway traffic back to the East Bay. Hi tech workers creeping alongside auto workers and warehouse workers. The only real difference between us high-tech workers and industrial workers is that we get paid half the amount. But then, that's the HP way.

—by Jay Clemens
Up at six I'M LATE roommate's got the shower DAMN it's COLD this is summer? Going to union hiring hall at least avoiding personnel sniffing my stinky armpits while I await student financial aid GOTTA piss bad fumble with shirt pants stumble down silent drowsy hallway OH NO if union officers notice my two year absence from hall in school paying cheapie unemployed dues they'll UGH my roommate's strange goofy morose part time boyfriend sits at kitchen table made the coffee thanks and lights up a joint he asks: Toke? Why not? Weed and coffee I'll be flying I'M SCARED a union officer scrunching up his face—"Haven't seen you around here past year buddy let's see your records"—good to piss finally wash face take a few more tokes gulp down coffee GUILTY shouts Local 6 President "of stealing privileges of union membership while attending school fulltime without regard for unemployed union brothers" OOOGH back to my room undercover snuggle with drowsy lover long hug make up after awful weekend fight soft heavenly flight warmth touch flesh MUST

OUT the door SCARED in my pocket "NICARAGUA INVASION" Claustrophobia of urban scraping by thousands huddling here on Shotwell Street Barrio Folsom 21st Street playground drugs basketball turf Folsom Boys Rule Y Que Fire Department Pacific Gas & Electric the closeness of war Ironworkers Hall fellow in car with Ironworkers patch on cap talking with wife at wheel "Don't start talking like..."

No vacation summer here
No Esprit De Corps t-shirts or Mediterranean sunlight
Gray thick blanket gray fog
its hues reflected onto streets buildings people
This is San Francisco too
Daily grind of lumbering into work daily

I'm shivering need heavier jacket is it the dope SCARED eyes scrutinizing ears listening haven't seen you around hall deserter from the ranks of the proletariat RUSHING traffic down 18th Street but Shotwell Street sleeps jacked up cars snoozing on sidewalk a box of tools left out unstolen watched by neighbors at 6:45? Passing Mission Health Center mural's fertile man/woman/child happily gazing cross street at Kilpatrick's Bakery whose pipes jut out: "VEG OIL" "SUGAR"—within graying 47 year olds coated with white wonder twinkie flour sugar and one 31 year old boyfriend of waitress at Rite Spot Cafe half block down her parents are intellectuals and she likes Sunday gospel services in Oakland RIGHT turn on 14th Street left on Folsom under freeway rushing walls scrawled "L'il Smiley" "Poor whites are the niggers of the revolution" past The Stud where only two nights ago I was drinking dancing walking weepy home past the TOOLMASTER store where it was spray painted "Oh
Toolmaster...Master Me’’ and “Master-bation causes tool damage’’ Still SCARED will I know anyone? Did they see me at The Stud? left on 11th Street left on Harrison past old beer brewery walls knocked out years ago empty uprooted vats sprawling fence torn WHERE ARE the wins street people junkies urban beasts and goblins and drunken thrill seeking teenagers staking out territory at night WHY is my heart racing?

Here hall is spray painted “International Loafers and Wins Union’’ Seven men slouching outside eye me curiously I nod PUSH frosted fog plexiglass door making gray sun grayer smoke flourescent-filled room BARS at Dispatch Window union newsletter dispatch rules and new stringent rules for people avoiding DUES in line at dispatcher’s window my god it’s Hefferson at window old time 400 lb. stand-up comedian alcoholic town fool who somebody says has cleaned up still gets soused occasionally and one of his kids takes him home and I always thought he lived in welfare hotels and when I make it to the window Hefferson says “10130? Yer number ain’t been on the job board for awhile—have to wait till after jobs go out to activate yer number’’ Okay just wanted to check on my number man STUPID so I came here for nothing wait 105 minutes for nothing oh well here I am

Nobody I know but the little red faced guy who never talked once in my 5 years at JOLLY FOODS which is topic of conversation of three other guys so I ask: they hiring still, what’s it like? “You worked there?’’ FEAR cannot reveal my illegal student status I say Yeah worked there 5 years but just got sick of it quit a couple of years ago—they three guys turn to me

Awestruck
You gave up a permanent position at Jolly Foods?
SAD
Very very sad
Their eyes are wide with pity and wonder at strange creature leaping to certain death a lemming wildly hopping out to sea

My excuse: young single restless male OUTSIDE breathe cool gray air cooly startled turn to find Angel my favorite Mexican Jolly Foods new Christian shop steward “How are you my friend?’’ sweet voice like fog floating over a hillside of three year absence FIRED Angel while visiting an ailing relative in Mexico

and THREATENED to terminate me year before that when my Dad dared to stay alive on his deathbed longer than three weeks JOLLY still making Angel pay for his sins he describes his eleven jobs since then he recalls the cursed name of JOLLY personnel executioner PINKERTON: no shit when he used to work at Schlage Lock people throw tools at him when he walked through the shop just like they did to his strikebreaking ancestors and when Angel saw him last week face full of waris scabs monster before our very eyes COLD

Inside sitting near dumpy old guy with bulging eyes wool cap Local 6-style Rodney Dangerfield close enough to be friendly not too close to be presumptuous reading of severed heads hearts homes wariscoming wariscoming american prez sez war soon if contadoras guys don’t negotiate something RAGE sinking into daily routine job school

Am I dying?
But walking to the hall I was alive scared alive worried alive shivering but money—but trapped—but moving—but happy away from muggys summers

Rodney is talking cut in unemployment benefits ‘cause recession is over it’s only melancholy 8.9% hear “So recession is over ha ha” HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA

HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA

I told ’em they should join the Army good benefits work on computers it’s wave of the future Rodney and friend spoke earnestly “I’m too old for the military’’ “I already did my time’’ so we get to talking they’re both from Wallworth’s closed down “this is Reagan country’’ whole warehouse a year ago “consolidation of operations another big warehouse shut tight another St.Regis Colgate Carnation

These 47 year old guys bunch of fish flip-flopping wildly on beach their scales do not shimmer in the sun the grungy greengraybrown walls/light (Angel is waiting for the flying fish of the future)

They ask where I worked my true confessions I quit Jolly Foods to go to school nine months unemployment benefits—NO—I did not tell them of bolshevik burnout, Rhonda, Miguel, bisexuality, The Stud, about how good it felt being fucked till he started pushing too hard—so I say night work was steady when I was at Jolly Rodney says Jolly doesn’t hire for night production anymore

Hefferson takes the dispatch mike: “No jobs yet Coffee truck is here if you want something” Guy standing in front bellows: “Fuck you and the coffee truck!” As people saunter out I’m still giggling to myself why I don’t know getting drowsy will go home to sleep soon Hefferson closes job board five minutes early so I can finally put my number up on job board behind 40 others maybe I should take that temp painting job STOP LOOK LISTEN: there are only three or four guys under 30 in this hall

Sitting down again near Rodney listening to his genial conversation with black guy his age they worked at Wallworth’s Rodney wants to leave at five past 9 turns to his friend

“Hey man gimme a dollar’s worth of change’’

“Shée-it, what choo want a dollar’s worth of change for’’

“For my daughter,’’ Rodney says.

“Shée-it, a dollar’s worth o’ change for his daughter—shée-it’’

Rodney trudges out back to his house in Visitacion Valley paid off but taxes are a batch and it’s too small to rent you know There was an old man who swallowed a house he died, of course.

by Jeff Goldthorpe
LIKE unwanted guests, computer hazards do not announce themselves. They inspire sharp denials of responsibility, but are awkwardly tolerated. No one seems to know from whence they came, and the most obvious ways of confronting them are often overlooked.

More than 20 million workers spend more than 25 billion hours per year working with computers. Offices install them at a rate approaching 3,000 per day. As computers change the way workers work and managers manage, business and government develop a profound dependency on them. As a result, disinterested answers to computer safety questions are hard to come by.

Corporations and government agencies have ignored, covered up, obscured, or refused to conduct research into computer hazards. But the disturbing evidence continues to accumulate and is now difficult, even for the computer faithful, to ignore.

That evidence includes research corroborating eleven clusters of miscarriages, birth defects, and problem pregnancies among women working with or near computers in North America (see PW #10 "The Ugly Truth About VDTs"). Concern has prompted the introduction of protective legislation in over half the states in the U.S. this year, as well as preparations for extensive NIOSH (National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health) and other studies of computer hazards. In response, computer boosters are launching campaigns to oppose and dilute proposed regulations—

and to douse the discouraging words about computers. These campaigns appear to be paying off.

The most disturbing biological changes experimentally associated with computers come from radiation and electromagnetic fields. These, unlike the coal soot, cotton dust, and asbestos hazards found in mines, mills, and construction sites, elude the senses. They may be linked to chronic disorders that take years to develop.

It's likely that a combination of elements conspire against computer workers' health. The elements include air quality, lighting, and the way management deploys computers, as well as radiation emissions. This complicates research. For example, a laboratory study of computer radiation that fails to reproduce office air and lighting conditions may not confirm a suspected computer hazard. Research insensitive to these conditions can produce equivocal results, which computer corporations applaud as evidence for ignoring the hazards.

A 1979 NIOSH study ("An Investigation of Health Complaints and Job Stress in Video Display Operators," ) suggested links between computer hazards symptoms, management's use of computers, and workplace division of labor. The study included data-entry clerks at San Francisco's Blue Shield Insurance worksite as well as reporters and editors at San Francisco newspapers. The study linked significant eye, back, and neck strain, headaches, fatigue, and tension to computer workers relative to a non-computer
using control group. But it also found that the more control workers had over computers and job tasks, the less stress they experienced.

After completion of the study, NIOSH psychologist Dr. Michael Smith commented on the hellish pace of computerized work for the data-entry clerks: "These jobs are repetitious and every little keystroke that an individual makes is recorded by the computer and a supervisor has only to look into a video tube to be able to key in on particular individuals and their performance. Partly as a result of this, VDT operators have the highest stress jobs that we’ve ever seen—and we’ve been in the stress business for ten years." On the other hand, the news reporters and editors NIOSH studied had fewer complaints about their computers, a fact that researchers linked to greater "flexibility, control over job tasks, and utilization of their education." (from Office Hazards, by Joel Makower, Tildem Press, Washington, D.C., 1981, p. 133)

In January, 1985, Suzanne Haynes, chief of medical statistics for the National Center of Health Statistics, presented findings of a study of 500 workers at (AT&T Communications’) Southern Bell telephone company in North Carolina. Research included 278 computer users and a control group of 218 non-computer users. The study confirmed the 1979-80 NIOSH findings linking computer use to a variety of mild-to-debilitating aches and pains. Haynes’ research also found that after more than 4 hours in front of a computer terminal, nearly 1 in 5 workers reported angina symptoms—about ten times the normal rate. (Angina is chest pain that occurs when coronary arteries constrict resulting in a lack of oxygen to the heart.)

These findings may point to profound, computer-induced pathology; more probably, they reflect the wear and tear of unbridled productivity which computers make possible in many workplaces. Like the Blue Shield workers, telephone workers, such as those in Haynes’ study, inhabit workplaces thrown into high gear by computers equipped with Orwellian software. Computers measure operators’ performance and speed against ever-increasing work quotas, monitor restroom trips, lunch periods, and announce staggered workbreaks that diminish the possibilities of informal contact with fellow workers.

Haynes tacitly indicted Southern Bell’s deployment of computers, attributing the telephone workers’ angina symptoms to computerized productivity demands, and long hours without adequate breaks in close quarters and with little human contact.

Here’s a breakdown of what’s known about computer hazards in light of additional research:

**Glare**

Computer workers can and do react to glare from display screens, but glare symptoms are neither acute nor physiologically exotic, and thus easily confused with chronic cold- and flu-like symptoms.

Glare from computer screens can cause (or worsen) eyestrain and bodyaches (symptoms also occurring in glare-free computer environments). Glare induces squinting and awkward posture to avoid blind spots and image-obscuring reflections on computer screens. Bright-

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ness and contrast controls and non-glare screens can reduce glare but often create a new eyesore: inadequate character resolution.

Bad lighting on glass screens causes glare. Office lighting designed for filing, typing, copying, mailing, etc., as well as reflective office wall and desk surface, are ill-suited for computer work. Also, electronic interference from other computers, flickering lights, a heart pacemaker, and even digital watches, carpeting and polyester clothing (a reservoir of static electricity) can strain eyes by reducing image clarity on the screen.

Screen glare is related to a broader visual problem. “Humans are equipped with hunter soldier eyes, made for distance vision. Using eyes for close work already requires adjustments; VDTs (Video Display Terminals) complicate the task,” according to Silicon Valley optometrist Dennis Olson. “Over a long time the problems that at first cause headaches and blurred vision only for a half hour after work can become permanent,” adds Dr. Charles Margach, a Southern California College optometry professor. Computer workers, especially those already wearing lenses, may require special, corrective “computer” lenses.

You can test the glare from your screen by moving a hand mirror along the screen with the reflective face out; reflected light—from walls, furniture, picture frames, ceilings, or light sources—is a potential source of glare.

Electromagnetic Field

On most display units in use today, computer images are constructed by a TV-like device that fires electron beams from behind the glass screen. The electron beams—also known as cathode rays—selectively excite tiny green, amber, or multi-colored phosphors to form characters and images. The device is called a flyback transformer—“flyback” describes the rapid, methodical sweep of the electron beams; “transformer” describes the conversion of data in computer memory into recognizable images on the screen. The rare-earth elements called phosphors lie directly underneath the glass screen. Phosphors glow only temporarily upon absorbing the electron beam. They must be re-stimulated or “refreshed” up to 30 to 60 times a second in order to form an image that appears stable to human eyes.

The phosphors absorb the flyback transformer beams imperfectly. As a result, an overflow of static electricity accumulates and hovers around the glass screen’s surface. This forms an electro-

magnetic field that bombards the screen and the operator’s face, upper body and arms with positively charged dust, soot, germs and other particles. These become lodged in the skin and eyes and on the screen. This phenomenon probably accounts for the red eyes, conjunctivitis, skin rashes and a gamut of allergic responses including fatigue, drowsiness, sinus problems, and headaches that afflict many computers users. When prolonged, such concentrated exposure can produce a “sensitized” condition in which only brief exposure to substances is sufficient to produce symptoms. The University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine’s Department of Dermatology recently reported “a patient with a dermatitis of his hands and distal forearms which we feel was caused by exposure to his visual display unit at work.”

In the energy-stingy, “sealed” environment of the modern office, electromagnetic bombardment from computers assumes dangerous proportions. Offices generate copier fumes, including ozone, and formaldehyde, radon, and other toxic substances emitted by the normal deterioration of furniture, walls, and carpets. In addition, harmful microorganisms and viruses can grow in ventilation systems. “Tight Building Syndrome,” “humidifier lung,” and other colloquialisms describe maladies caused by toxic particles, germs and viruses circulating in poorly ventilated worksites. Researchers now worry that particle bombardment from computer-generated electromagnetic fields may act like fuel-injection in cars, accelerating the rate and effects of exposure to otherwise small amounts of ambient organic and inorganic irritants.

Electromagnetic fields also cause computer workers to inhale an abnormal concentration of positive ions. The absence of negative ions may affect biochemistry in ways that are not yet clear, but that may induce mood swings and long-term health changes including insomnia, asthma and hormonal imbalances.

Radiation

Computers emit two kinds of radiation: ionizing and nonionizing. The more clearly dangerous of the two is ionizing radiation, including X-rays. There is no question that X-rays heat human tissue, alter cell structures, and cause birth defects, cancer, chromosome damage, premature aging, and cataracts. Government and industry officials claim that X-ray emissions from computers, like those from TV, are insignificant or nil.

The other kind, nonionizing radiation, is lower in energy than X-rays and includes visible light, microwaves, infrared waves, radio frequency (RF) waves, and very low frequency (VLF—also known as Extremely Low Frequency—ELF) waves such as household electrical current. Computers emit RF, VLF, and microwave nonionizing radiation.
though the latter is disputed. VLF radiation is almost impossible to accurately gauge outside of a lab.

Desktop computers emit radiation in pulses—16,000 every second on most models. Radiation levels are highest near the computer terminal’s flyback transformer. This means that workers sitting behind or near computers also may be exposed.

Until recently, nonionizing radiation was thought biologically harmless. But microwave, RF, and VLF radiation have been associated with blood, cell, brain, heart, and fertility abnormalities. What is known about all three types of nonionizing radiation cannot be considered reassuring to computer workers. Consider the following studies:

• In April, 1985, a Swedish neurologist reported symptoms of brain damage, an abnormal spinal fluid protein, and severe mental impairment in radar maintenance workers exposed to microwave radiation for 10 years or more.

• Two studies concluded that electromagnetic fields can alter heart rates; in one, biologist Allen Grey at Randomline, Inc. stopped frog hearts with nonionizing radiation; in another, University of Utah researcher John Lords used microwaves to speed up and slow down turtle hearts.

• A joint Department of Energy and New York State Department of Health study at the Midwest Research Institute in Kansas City, Mo., showed that a group of 21-35 year-old males experienced slowed heart rates and altered brain wave patterns when exposed to nonionizing radiation fields.

• A soon-to-be-published Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene study of 951 men who died of brain tumors between 1969 and 1982 concluded that “electromagnetic exposure may be associated with the pathogenesis [onset] of brain tumors.” The tumor-victim study revealed “a disproportionate representation of workers employed in occupations associated with electricity or electromagnetic fields.”

• Research in Czechoslovakia, Sweden, and Spain has linked VLF radiation to adverse effects on animal embryos. In 1982, Madrid researchers found that pulsed magnetic fields had dramatic, adverse effects on chick embryos, including severe brain damage, undeveloped nervous systems and improperly formed hearts. Subsequent research showed that such effects were caused by the shape of the VLF pulse. Additional tests indicate that, in both shape and intensity, computer-emitted VLF pulses are similar to those that damaged the chick embryos in Madrid.

Sleazy Research

The Madrid findings suggest the link between the eleven clusters of problem pregnancies and computers. But the veracity of research is in the eyes of the beholder. In testimony before a congressional committee, representatives from the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists rejected radiation as the cause of computer workers’ miscarriages.

No enforceable standards for exposure levels to most kinds of nonionizing radiation exist in the U.S.; if they did, they would be enforceable by OSHA only as “suggested guidelines.” U.S. microwave exposure levels are among the highest in the world. Exposure levels for X-rays are negotiable. For example, by dint of a government-industry agreement, hospital and nuclear energy industry workers enjoy a 5 rem per year maximum dose of X-rays, a standard 10 times that for the general population. Existing standards are the products of a sleazy history of government-sponsored research into computer and radiation hazards.

The U.S. government ignored early international warnings about microwave hazards for decades, as well as domestic studies (conducted by consultants for the Department of Defense in the 50s and 60s) linking microwaves to cataracts. The CIA conducted secret microwave research beginning in 1962 after complaints of bleeding eyes, nausea, and suspected chromosome damage from U.S. embassy personnel in Moscow. The USSR, which studied microwaves extensively, apparently beamed microwaves at the embassy. The results of the CIA’s research were kept secret. It’s possible that the embassy microwave transmissions fell within subsequent U.S. exposure levels set in 1966 at 10 milliwatts per square centimeter per hour, a level one thousand times higher than that of the Soviet Union. But it was not long before the U.S. standards became the center of one of the first widely publicized computer hazard controversies.

In 1977, two New York Times copy editors developed cataracts after working on a new computer system for six months. Their doctors suggested the link between cataracts and computer-emitted microwaves. With the help of the Newspaper Guild, the copy editors pursued grievance proceedings. NIOSH and the Center for Disease Control were called in on the case and found nonionizing radiation at levels below the bloated 10 milliwatt standard. As a result, the case was dropped. Dr. Milton Zaret, an ophthalmologist, veteran microwave researcher, and consultant for the Times workers, maintained that no level of radiation has yet been proved safe.

In 1981, with evidence of microwave damage mounting, the American National Standards Institute adopted a new microwave exposure limit of one milliwatt per square centimeter, one-tenth the previous U.S. standard, though still among the highest in the world.

Suspect research also underpins government claims regarding computer-emitted X-rays. In 1981, the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA’s) Bureau of Radiological Health supposedly tested 125 computer terminals for radiation, finding that “VDTs emit little or no harmful [X-ray] radiation under normal operating conditions.” The agency also reported finding ‘insignificant’ amounts of microwave and RF radiation.

On the face of it, the tests were inadequate; most computers were not tested. Among those tested, the highest emission levels were estimated to be 2 millirems per hour. In Office Work Can Be Dangerous To Your Health (Pantheon N.Y. 1983), Stellman and Henifin note that: “...at a typical usage rate of 6 hours per day for 50 weeks per year, the total average exposure would be 3 rem per year, which substantially exceeds the 0.5 rem per year limit for the general population. A pregnant woman operating such a machine for 36 weeks of her pregnancy could be exposed to levels in excess of those recommended by the government for pregnant women.”

As it is, the numbers that emerged from the FDA’s tests are hardly what statistics people call “robust.” In testimony before Congress, Bureau of Radiological Health chief John Villforth admitted that his agency’s reassuring findings were based only upon theoretical computer models—the agency had not actually performed any radiation tests. Dr. Zaret called the FDA’s research methods “idiotic.” (Makower, p. 118 ibid.)

By an FCC decree, computers and kindred devices built after October, 1983, must emit lesser amounts of RF radiation. Reflecting priorities computer workers may not fully appreciate, the FCC was moved to action by increasing complaints that RF radiation was interfering with radio and television reception—not by concern for the health and safety of computer users. RF interference became a problem as profit-minded computer manufacturers shifted from the safer, metal computer shells to cheaper, plastic ones. Compared to metal, plastic provides little or no radiation protection.
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Apparently, though, computers sold since the 1983 FCC ruling took effect continue to leak significant levels of RF radiation. At a cost of over $1 billion annually, computer equipment bought by the National Security Agency through its Tempest program is "ruggedized"—i.e., shielded or covered with electrically conductive plastic or paint to seal off RF radiation. The NSA wants to preempt electronic eavesdropping through RF signal detection, not prevent RF radiation symptoms among its workers.

In light of all this, the announcement of a new epidemiological computer hazards study by NIOSH is a qualified bright spot. NIOSH will examine 6,000 married, employed women of child-bearing age; half of the subjects will be computer operators in nonmanagement positions, and the other half will be nonusers acting as the study’s control group. The NIOSH study may someday produce profound results. But Microwave News editor Louis Slesin cautions us not to hold our breath: “[The NIOSH study] will take three years to complete after a study population is selected and a questionnaire is cleared by the federal Office of Management and Budget. The latter step alone could take years.”

Slesin observes of previous NIOSH computer hazards research: "After conducting numerous [job site] surveys of VDT radiation levels and issuing countless assurances that radiation emissions are not threatening, NIOSH staff members admitted in the spring of 1983 that they could not measure VLF [radiation] at a job site."

The NIOSH study bucks a trend. This October, the EPA will dissolve its nonionizing radiation research group at the Health Effects Research Laboratory in Research Triangle Park, N.C. Last year, the EPA concluded a five-year study of broadcast frequencies, which is said to be responsible for 90% of the nonionizing radiation to which Americans are exposed. On the eve of publication of the EPA’s suggested guidelines in the Federal Register, they were dropped as a result of what the Washington Post called "a high-level, internal agency review." The Post characterized the guidelines as “the first step toward setting standards for nonionizing radiation exposure to the general population.” Even the Department of Defense, which can hardly complain of underfunding, is drastically cutting monies for nonionizing radiation research. And this fall, the Department of Energy is slashing by one half the budget for its Electric Energy Systems Division, which studies the effects of power lines on health.

Computer Legislation

Last year, 9 to 5, the National Association of Working Women, and the Service Employees International Union undertook lobbying campaigns to introduce computer safety bills in 18 state legislatures. Approximately 25 states are expected to hear such bills this year.

The proposed legislation varies widely, from right-to-know bills that would familiarize workers with healthful computer use and maintenance, to computer purchasing guidelines for state agencies, to so-called “ergonomic bills” requiring employers to provide non-glare shields, adjustable screens, removable keyboards, work breaks, and/or non-computer work for pregnant workers.

As of March this year, computer hazards legislation was furthest along in Oregon. The proposed bill, a diluted version of one introduced last year, would require the state to set up an education program for employers and generate guidelines for computer use. But the guidelines would be optional for private employers, and binding only for state agencies where computers are used for four hours or more each day. Computers already in use would be exempted.

Oregon Governor Victor Atiyeh, with one eye on the developing Beaverton-area high tech industry (“Silicon Forest”), pledges to veto the bill. Beaverton-based Tektronix Corp., a giant computer firm and the state’s largest employer, leads the opposition. Tektronix makes large, high resolution computer screens that may pose a higher risk to users than smaller computer screens. Ironically, the higher-risk group includes computer-making engineers, who work with the larger screens to design and layout microchip logic.

In Massachusetts, hearings on seven computer safety bills were scheduled to begin in April. The state legislature has rejected such bills during each of the past five years, boasts the Associated Industries of Massachusetts, a coalition of pro-computer industries. Last year, according to ComputerWorld (March 25, 1985), Massachusetts decreed voluntary computer safety guidelines and purchasing specifications, and granted $75,000 to study computer hazards. According to 9 to 5’s Elaine Taber, the voluntary guidelines are for public sector workers only and do not comprehensively address computer hazards.
In California last year, a heavy industry lobby persuaded politicians to drop proposed computer hazards legislation. The bill, introduced by Tom Hayden, called for adequate lighting, periodic breaks, and glare screens or brightness and contrast controls for computer workers. It also mandated radiation shielding and alternative work for pregnant women—demands that were dropped "for strategic reasons," according to a supporter, when the bill was re-introduced in the state legislature this year. That bill was recently tabled, and proponents have conceded defeat. Another bill mandating employer coverage of eye exams and corrective lenses for computer workers is pending in the California Senate. A third bill establishing computer purchasing guidelines for the state also was tabled, though the California Office of Information Technology reportedly has adopted similar guidelines.

Corporate opposition to computer safety bills is not difficult to understand. Even such relatively weak laws as those being mulled in Oregon, Massachusetts, and elsewhere impart legitimacy to the issue of computer hazards. With upwards of $70 billion in yearly computer sales, the thought of litigating computer hazard claims raises hair on corporate heads. The damages for computer hazard suits could make the sums sought in the Johns Manville asbestos class action look like pin money.

"Advice to managers and users is the best way to make people more comfortable in the office, reduce stress, and let people know that visual displays are completely safe," testified Vico Henriques before the House Subcommittee on Health and Safety. Henriques recommends the advice of the Computer and Business Equipment Manufacturers Association (CBEMA) whose president he is. Henriques argues that "legislative mandates [limiting exposure to computers] would force citizens to conform to a legislator's supposition about what will make them feel better." The CBEMA evidently prefers a status quo in which citizens conform to CBEMA's suppositions about computer safety. Accordingly, CBEMA plans a multimedia promotional campaign aimed at countering what Henriques terms the "public's delight in the sensational" stories about miscarriages and the widespread "misconception" (sic) that computer work isn't mentally stimulating. (Science for the People March/April '85).

CBEMA recently joined with like-minded associations to form the Coalition for Office Technology. The Coalition is establishing an information center in Washington D.C. to provide moral and logistical guidance in local battles against state computer hazards legislation. The Coalition includes such disinterested parties as IBM, Digital Equipment Corporation, the American Insurance Association, the American Newspaper Publishers Association, and the Air Transport Association of America (ATA). The ATA represents 31 airline corporations employing 150,000 computer workers and, according to ComputerWorld, "tracks up to 4,000 bills filed nationwide each year."

**Workers on Their Own**

Computer workers tied for long hours to their terminals with little immediate control over how they use them are probably most vulnerable to computer hazards. The suggestions below apply to all computer workers.

Ophthalmologists recommend twice-yearly eye examinations to monitor and correct computer-induced visual problems. It's best to seek out physicians familiar with computer hazards.

According to a nonbinding NIOSH recommendation, "a 15 minute work-rest break should be taken after one hour of continuous VDT work for operators under high visual demands, high workload or those engaged in repetitive work tasks." The British Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs (ASTMS), agrees, and also suggests a less qualified proposal for all computer workers: "No more than four hours [in front of a computer] should be worked in any one day."

These and other preventive measures inevitably raise broader questions about the workplace control and use of computers—questions that transcend computer hazards. Some of those hazards are amenable to technical fixes. The NSA's efforts to silence computer RF signals may spur development of affordable, accessible radiation containment technologies. At the moment, however, NSA's "ruggedizing" adds a 100-300% premium to the cost of a desk-top computer.

Fortunately, less expensive computer shielding is available now. The conductive mesh filters fit over computer screens and prevent formation of an electromagnetic field, absorbing and safely draining radiation emitted through a screen. (Conductive mesh shielding that covers an entire computer is also reportedly available.) In addition, the filters reduce glare without reducing image resolution. Priced at under $100, the conductive filters cost less than many nonconductive screen shields that reduce glare only.

If computer-making corporations designed and built-in protection during manufacture (they don't), the cost of containing radiation emissions would drop dramatically.

Unable to rely on immediate relief from the legislative front, concerned workers are quietly winning small victories by directly confronting the problem. When confronted, corporations that help sponsor popular ignorance of computer hazards show surprising flexibility.

IBM publicly denies evidence linking its computers to hazards, but allows its Silicon Valley workers to purchase conductive screen filters at company expense. At another Silicon Valley firm, chipmaker LSI Logic Corporation, computer workers now have an open purchasing order for conductive filters despite their former president's active efforts to defeat the Hayden-sponsored computer safety bills.

In view of the government and industry's records on computer hazards, such direct initiatives probably provide the most reliable protection. Computer workers are on their own.

—by Dennis Hayes

[Processed World is collecting information on computer hazards and "office ecology." If you have some, pass it on. If you need some—including names and addresses of firms making conductive mesh filters for computer screens—write us. We'll try to help.]