

Exerpts from *How to Take an Exam . . . and Remake the World*

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Bertell Ollman

Editors' Introduction

There is the chanting mob: noisy, raucous, probably not terribly dangerous. There is the silent mob: ominous, serious, quietly menacing, more dangerous. Then there is the laughing mob. When the laughing mob approaches, the Masters might be wise to flee. The laughing mob could be the mob that will overcome. In this book, Bertell Ollman is the agitator and educator of that laughing mob. Ollman suggests that capitalism is reaching the ends of its tether, that socialism is possible, and that part of the bridge from one to the other is the knowledge of one of his key points, "Resignation sucks!" Ridicule, coupled with analysis, is a powerful weapon.

In his latest book, Ollman moves wittily between an analysis of school, grades, and exams (and how to beat them) and an accessible examination of the workings of capital--and plenty of great cartoons. The author of both the board game, *Class Struggle*, and the erudite earlier work, *Alienation*, Ollman has a lifetime of rigorous and popular scholarship as a legacy to follow.

Here, we excerpt parts of his book, *How to Take an Exam . . . and Remake the World*, which address at least three key questions: How shall we come to comprehend our world and our places in it? How is what we know influenced by how we came to know it? What is the state of capitalism within globalism? Why is the government (and the school) there, and what is it that is veiled, hidden, within our everyday lives that can offer a way out--toward a world where creative interdependence can reasonably dominate greed and fear? Interspersed are a few of Ollman's terrific interjections about exams and their taking.

It Is the Theory That Sets Up What We Know of the Particular and the General

This book is full of "patterns" that most people in our society are socialized not to see. Such are the connections between the working class and the capitalist class, between the interests of the capitalists and how our government works, between feelings of alienation and the power of money (upcoming), and there are many others. In every case, most people see the parts well enough but not the connections and not the overall pattern, or capitalism, which is made up of the sum of these connections. Capitalism, as such, is virtually invisible in the social sciences. Yet, it is only the connections and the resulting pattern that gives meaning and value to the parts. In an instant, all sorts of "paradoxes" and mysteries--like growing poverty in the midst of growing wealth--make sense. ("This is what capitalism is. This is how it looks. This is how it works.") But it is a sense that those who run our society and determine our socialization (including your education) would prefer we didn't get.

As regards the form, this separation--repeated on a hundred fronts--of what cannot be separated without distortion is the key feature of what is called "un-dialectical" thought. "Dialectical" thinking, on the other hand, is the ongoing effort to grasp things in terms of their interconnections and this includes their ties with their own preconditions and future possibilities as well as with whatever is affecting them (and whatever they are affecting) right now. The whole panoply of otherwise confusing dialectical concepts--such as "contradiction," "totality," "abstraction," etc., (which I have tried to spare readers of this book)--is directed to making some group of interconnections easier to think about. To make more and better sense out of the trivia, paradoxes, half-truths and outright nonsense that constitutes such a large part of most people's understanding of society, therefore, requires not only a lot of facts that are generally hidden from us but a more dialectical grasp of the facts we already know.

Rules For Writing by Steve Rubin

- 1) Each pronoun has to agree with their antecedent.
- 2) Just between you and I, case is important.
- 3) Verbs has to agree with their subjects.
- 4) Watch out for irregular verbs that have cropped into our language.
- 5) Do not use no double negatives.
- 6) When dangling, do not use participles.
- 7) Join clauses good, like a conjunction should.
- 8) Be careful of run-on sentences they have to be punctuated.
- 9) About sentence fragments
- 10) In letters themes reports articles and other writings commas are used to keep a string of items apart.
- 11) Do not use commas, that are not necessary.
- 12) Its important to use apostrophe's correctly.
- 13) Do not abb rev. unless the meaning is clear.
- 14) Check to see if you any words out.
- 15) An author when he is writing should not get into the habit of making use of too many

unnecessary words that really are not needed.

16) Never use a preposition to end a sentence with.

17) Always spell out numbers from 1 to 10.

18) The active voice is preferred by most writers.

19) But of course, a conjunction cannot be used at the beginning of a sentence.

20) Last but not least, lay off cliches.

Okay, be honest now. At what number did you notice that each rule embodies the very mistake it identifies? If you got past five, you're in trouble. If you made it to ten, you need help with reading, English grammar, or both. If you made it all the way to twenty, maybe you should consider writing in another language. Alternatively, you may just have a bad authority hangup with teachers, so that you can't imagine that they would commit such errors. This is akin to the gullibility so many students showed in believing my nonsense lecture (above). In either case, now that you know the extent of your problem, you can get busy working on it. Incidentally, there are exceptions to most of these "good writing" rules (as you will have noticed from reading this book), but you have to know the rule to sense when you can get away with an exception.

Do you suffer from the feeling of being disconnected from the world around you, of isolation, of not belonging, of no one caring, of being an outsider, and therefore of being ineffectual and powerless? If so, you've got lots of company. This is one of the greatest mysteries of our time, since it is not clear where this "normal suffering" comes from. Another equally big mystery has to do with the extraordinary power of money in our society and the willingness of most people to do virtually anything to acquire it.

These two mysteries don't seem to have much in common, but Marx treats both of them as aspects of the problem he calls "alienation." Many psychologists and sociologists use this term, but they limit the meaning of "alienation" to some version of the psychological malaise given above. What is crucial for Marx, on the other hand, is the overall situation of the person who has these feelings, and, in particular, the part played by money. In his discussion of alienation, this is brought out by focusing on four relations that lie at the heart of the work experience in our society: 1) the relation between the individual and his/her productive activity, in which others determine how it is done, under what conditions, at what speed, and for what wage or salary, and even if and when it is to begin and end; 2) the relation between the individual and the product of that activity, in which others control and use the product for their own purposes (making something does not confer any right to use what one has made); 3) the relation between the individual and other people, particularly with those who control both one's productive activity and its products, where each side pursues their own interests without considering the effect of their actions on the other (mutual indifference and competition becomes the characteristic forms of human interaction); and 4) the relation between the individual and the species, or with what it means to be a human being. For Marx, the ties between an individual and his productive activities, products, and the other people with whom he cooperates at work are essential aspects of human nature. To cut these ties, which is what happens when any element in this cluster is removed from one's control, is to deprive

people of a good deal of their potential for coordinated growth and development and to leave them humanly diminished.

Though Marx's discussion of alienation is centered on the sphere of production, these four relations can also be found in other areas of capitalist life--in education, politics, culture, science and religion--wherever, in fact, people's activities and products (including services and ideas) are under the control of others who use them to further their own special interests. In this way, for example, students whose distinctive activities include coming to lectures, taking exams, paying tuition, etc. can be seen as producing a range of "products" that include grades, diplomas, professors and the university itself. Through activities of relating to "this" building as a university, it is they (you) who turn it into one. Otherwise, it is simply an ordinary building. The same with the talkative man or woman who is turned into a professor by your treating him/her as such.

Both of these activities and products are under the control of the higher administrations and boards of trustees of our universities, who cleverly manipulate them in the service of their own interests with relative indifference to the real interests of the students. The result is that students are cut off from and have little to say over the entire university context that constitutes so much of their lives as students. Yet, this context is an essential part of who they are as human beings (aspects of what Marx considers their broader human nature) as well as of what they are as students. Diminished as people in the very act of manifesting their identity as students within the capitalist university, is it any wonder that most students feel disconnected, isolated and powerless?

What about the mysterious power of money? It is obvious that money can only buy what people are able and willing to sell. In our society, that includes virtually everything, but it does so only because most of the ties that have bound us to the world--to the products we make, to the activities that make them and the qualities of strength, judgement, intelligence used in making them, to the other people involved with us in the process--have been severed in alienated activity of one sort or another. People don't sell their limbs or other parts of themselves that are considered essential to who and what they are. So in feudalism, for example, serfs--who suffered another form of domination--could not sell their labor power or the products of their labor. They wouldn't even think of doing so. But as people got separated from their own qualities, conditions, activities and products by the alienation described above, the portion of the world and of our life in the world that became available for sale grew and with it the power of money to buy it.

Money, in other words, only buys what people as a result of their alienation no longer are. Hence, Marx's striking reference to money as "the alienated ability of mankind." It is the ability and qualities we had and lost that now confront us in the mysterious form of money. It's power is our own power that has been taken from us, mystified, reified and turned against us in the hands of those, the rich, who have interests that are opposed to our own. When a *New Yorker* cartoon says, "Money is life's report card," it informs us not only on how much better some are doing than others in capitalism but on how poorly we are all doing in life.

The history of capitalism can be told as a story of how human beings through their alienation have become progressively less human, less connected to and with less control over all that distinguish us as a species from the rest of the animal world (hence, increasingly isolated and powerless), and how more and more of what we need to live has become the private property of others ("Things are in the saddle and they ride mankind" in the words of the poet Wordsworth). Or, this same history can be recounted as a story of how money has acquired ever greater power over people as the only means by which we can get others, who are in a similar fix, to provide us with the necessities of life that we no longer control. The two mysteries with which we began--people's feelings of isolation and powerlessness and the extraordinary power of money--are easily resolved once we recognize they make up two sides of the same phenomenon, which is but the alienated life process of capitalist society.

Studying. What kind of exam does your teacher give? Don't rely only on what he/she says. Ask students who have taken the course before; examine the course evaluations that may have been put out by the professor's department or by the Student Government; and try to get hold of exams from previous years. The fewer surprises you have on seeing the exam, the better you are likely to do.

What is the relation between grades and money? In ancient Greek mythology, Procrustes was an inn keeper who made sure that guests fit perfectly into the bed he prepared for them. Those who were too short were stretched, while guests who were too tall had their legs trimmed to the size of the bed. Both money and grades serve our society as Procrustean beds. Money enables us to compare very different things on the basis of their price. Grades enable us to compare very different people on the basis of a letter. Once we attach a monetary value to something, its other qualities become much less important and are often ignored altogether. The same thing happens to the distinctive qualities of each person once we view him or her as an "A," "B," or "C" student.

"Commodification" is the process by which things acquire a price. What is made to be eaten, worn, lived in, etc. finds its way into the market and is hereafter thought about and valued largely in function of its price. Grades represent the commodification of the learning process. They stand in for many different kinds and levels of knowledge much like money does for the different kind of products it can buy. Grades reduce the enormous variety of human talent and achievement to a single dimension (what gets tested), then measures it, and eventually replaces it in the eyes of students, teachers and the general public alike. No wonder the grade consciousness of many students often reaches demented proportions, very much like the greed for money.

Grades could only acquire this power, because--as in the case of money--the activities they represent have become separated from and turned against the very people who are engaged in them. As we saw in the discussion of alienation above, everything students do as part of getting educated is controlled by those who run the universities and used primarily for their own benefit. Thus, exams break down students, viewed as a group of people who share a common interest in acquiring an education, into so many atomistic individuals competing for a limited good; while grading recombines the now isolated

individuals into new, artificial groups ("A" students, "B" students, etc.), whose most distinctive qualities are of greatest interest to their future employers. More than a simple instrument of control, grades are the sign that academic servitude has arrived full circle. It is the form in which the relation of domination itself has passed into the hands of its victims, who are encouraged to treat the yellow star sown onto their jackets as if it were an Olympic gold medal.

Why Have Government?

For capitalism to work, it needs the help of the Government. The Government has four main functions in a capitalist society: 1) to help capitalists "accumulate capital" (expand their wealth through profitable investments); 2) to help capitalists "realize value" (sell what they produce--Government as Super-Salesman); 3) to repress and otherwise render ineffective all movements that threaten the social relations (mainly capitalist domination over workers) that underlay these developments; and 4) to legitimate all of the above in the eyes of the general public by masking its aims and the practices linked to them in the language of national interests, freedom, democracy, justice and patriotism.

Virtually everything our Government does can be placed under one or another of these headings, just because it is not really *our* Government but *their* Government, controlled by the capitalists and bent on serving their interests. This applies as much to foreign policy as to domestic policy. As more and more investment, lending and sales take place outside our national boundaries, American capitalists require the same kind of help from the Government around the globe that they have always received inside the country. "Imperialism" is the name given to this imperative--and it must be grasped as an imperative--and the sum of policies associated with it. One hundred and even fifty years ago, this usually took the form of militarily occupying foreign lands to ensure their total compliance with the needs of our capitalists.

More recently, in the stage of capitalism that has been dubbed "globalization," it has been found that the same goals could be attained just as effectively and with less opposition by using chains made of loans, investments, so-called aid (mostly to buy our products and to ensure a friendly military), and even culture. Convenient help in putting these chains in place is provided by such world (sic) organizations as the I.M.F., the World Bank and the W.T.O., all of which are dominated by the American Government, and, therefore, by American capital. In this strategy, it is very important that the rising middle class in these unfortunate lands come to mirror our own. Then, with all the parts in place, it no longer makes much difference if the man who calls himself President or Prime Minister is a local product or not. He cannot help but deliver what our capitalists want.

What is it to be psychologically prepared for an exam? It may be easier to begin by listing those states to be avoided. You don't want to show up for an exam too tired, too anxious, too frightened; nor do you want to be too relaxed, too easy going and too casual. Instead, one should strive for a kind of creative tension where perceptual acuity and heightened concentration blend with the calm self-confidence of knowing that you are

going to do well. You know you've got it when you can't wait for the exam to get started. As a rule, the mental and emotional conditions you are looking for can't be produced directly but are largely byproducts of what you've done in preparing for the exam. Thus, everything that goes into getting ready for the exam, including learning these exam hints, must also be judged in terms of how it affects your psychological state.

But why should our democratically elected Government do what the capitalists want? First, as indicated above, at the highest levels, our Government is made up of capitalists and their lawyers, and, at least in the U.S., this is true no matter which party is in power. Second, making a serious run for any major political office costs a small fortune, and capitalists are only willing to fund candidates who share their views (or who have no views and are simply willing to do what the capitalists want). Coverage in the capitalist-owned media reflects the same set of priorities. Third--and this deserves more emphasis than it gets--given ours is a capitalist society in which the creation of both wealth and jobs is determined by the amount and direction of capitalist investment, the Government is forced to adopt policies that stimulate such investment. Since capitalists only invest in order to maximize profits, this third reason translates into policies that help them produce more cheaply and in greater security, sell more easily, and reap the benefits of both in the culture. This is a structural constraint, in that the economy, being what it is, requires a certain kind of politics, no matter who is in power and no matter what their initial intentions, given that the Government is unwilling to overturn capitalism completely. Hence the classic dilemma of social democracy, as evident from the recent histories of the German Social Democratic, French Socialist, and British Labour Parties. In every case, these parties wished to have it both ways, that is, to keep an essentially capitalist economy while putting into effect a social program that favored workers' interests. In every case, the result was that the capitalists held back enough of their investment to harm the entire economy forcing the Social Democratic Government to reverse its pro-worker policies. The same reversal can be found in the recent history of Sweden, Spain, Australia, New Zealand, Jamaica and a dozen other countries.

While the capitalists retain the power to invest the surplus product of society, the margin for undertaking any policy that goes against their interests is very small. But one does not have to accept that society's wealth remain under the control of the capitalists. There are other ways to organize an economy, other rules to play by, other criteria that could determine investment decisions than maximizing the profit of a few. Just give your imagination a little room to maneuver, and you'll see them too.

In Essay and Oral Exams, what constitutes good evidence varies somewhat with the discipline and with the school of thought to which one adheres. Still, how one marshals the evidence, how one organizes and presents it, and how one treats contrary evidence are always major components of a good answer. The last, in particular, shows the teacher that you're open to what you find that goes against your position as well as to what supports it. One of the marks of a good scholar.

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Many of you are thinking, the courts, especially the Supreme Court, must be different. When William O. Douglas joined the Supreme Court just before World War II, then Chief Justice, Charles Evan Hughes, told him, "You must remember one thing. At the Constitutional level where we work, 90% of any decision is emotional. The rational part of us supplies the reason for supporting our predilections." So forget impartial justice, forget fairness. After some time on the Supreme Court, Douglas himself came to the conclusion that "The more the public learns about the inner workings of the Supreme Court . . . the harder it becomes to justify the special powers of this elite institution in our governmental scheme. And the justices know this." Hence, all the black robes, raised diases and legal mumbo-jumbo, only decipherable by a well paid priestly cast of lawyers. The Supreme Court is where the Wizard of Oz, with a wave of his Constitutional wand, tries to turn a land bleeding with capitalist excesses into a Walt Disney fairy tale about "the rule of law." The purpose of it all is not justice but legitimation. The bottom line is that whenever the Supreme Court speaks of "justice," they really mean "just-us."

Walking out early from an exam. If your aim is to impress your fellow students (at least, those who won't hate you for upping their anxiety level), go ahead. The teacher is just as likely to think you don't know the answers, or that he/she made the exam too easy. But if you're interested in getting the best possible grade, don't waste these peak moments. Intellectually speaking, you're probably at your best during the last third of the exam. Re-reading the questions and your answers--there are always small errors to correct and things to add--will never fail to improve your performance.

The main problem confronting bourgeois ideology, is how to hide an elephant in the living room. The elephant, of course, is capitalism. Capitalism is no less conspicuous, and no less easy to disguise and defend, especially to an audience of people it is actively harming, than an elephant would be if it were roaming in your living room.

Left on its own, devoid of all rationalizations, capitalism is about as attractive as slavery and feudalism. That's why it's never left on its own. Instead, it is always accompanied by an elaborate set of ideas and concepts that Marx calls "bourgeois ideology." Some of this ideology simply reflects people's experience of living and working in capitalist society. After buying a number of things with money, for example, it's easy to get the idea that money--the thing, money viewed apart from all its social relations--has a mysterious power to obtain whatever its holder wants. This belief that something dead is really alive with its own special powers is what Marx calls "fetishism," and it plays an important role in his theory of alienation. But today, probably most ideology is the product of a huge consciousness industry that includes the media, the schools, advertising, mass spectator spots, the courts, the churches and much else. The chief aim of this consciousness industry is to convince us that capitalism is a good society, or--failing that--that it is the natural form of society (so that good or bad, nothing can be done about it), or--failing that--to so confuse us about who we are and what is happening to us that we can't even begin to think straight about the kind of society we live in and/or would like to live in.



These aims are achieved in three main ways: by hiding capitalism, by disguising it and by defending it. Hiding anything usually occurs by putting something else in front of it. Capitalism is too bulky for this to work, so bourgeois ideologists have found ways of hiding capitalism in plain sight. And the main technique they have used is calling it by another name. A German sociologist has counted 28 such names, the most important of which are "market society, modern society, post modern society," "globalization," "industrial society, knowledge society," and "information society." Capitalists, too, as we saw earlier, prefer to go by other names in the popular press. The various substitutes for "capitalism" not only organize social reality in different ways, they also emphasize certain aspects of that reality just as they trivialize and/or ignore other aspects altogether.

An example of distorting capitalism is to view it as a result of individual choices, using as a model the purchases we make as consumers in the market. With this approach, all that influences individuals in making their choices just as the historical and structural restraints on the alternatives between which each individual must choose (in sum, all that Marxism emphasizes) is either trivialized or completely ignored. Rational Choice theory and methodological individualism more generally are the main vehicles for this approach in the academy. An example of defending capitalism is arguing that capitalism is a necessary precondition for freedom and democracy. (It is. That is, it is for "capitalist" freedom and "capitalist" democracy, and we have seen what they are like.) Hiding capitalism, distorting it and defending it are often found together, but it is important to separate them out if only to see that it is the first activity that is decisive. Capitalism is not very easy to disguise or defend, especially when the problems associated with it have noticeably worsened. But, as with the elephant, if you can hide capitalism, there is no need to disguise or defend it. Hence, the main efforts of bourgeois ideology--and now more than ever--have gone into hiding capitalism.

### **Pay Attention to the Man, and the Process, Behind the Screen**

What exactly is it about capitalism that our rulers are trying to hide? The short list would have to include: 1) that the most apt label for our society--because it brings into focus how our society works (particularly in production, an area of life that most of the other labels ignore or obscure), for whom it works better, for whom it works worse, and its potential for change--is "capitalism"; 2) that the real rulers of this society are those who own the means of production, distribution and exchange, and reap the bulk of the surplus; 3) that the Government, whatever democratic foreplay goes on, serves their interests, hence is their Government and not ours; 4) that we, the rest of us who don't live on profit, rent or interest, are workers (whether we are willing to admit it or not), because we are forced to seek work in order to live; 5) that the conditions of life and work for us workers are bad and likely to get much worse--while the wealth of the capitalists keeps growing; 6) that a qualitatively better life, a more humane, just, free, democratic, egalitarian and ecologically rational way of organizing society can be developed; 7) that those who benefit from the present order of society have consistently lied to us about all of the above; and 8) that once workers--in the broad sense of the term--break through these lies and half-truths, they/we can win.

Now the best way for the capitalists to hide all of these facts is to hide the first one, that our's is a capitalist society, because once people learn this all of the facts that follow become easier to see and to grasp. In his book, *In Praise of Folly*, Erasmus tells the story of a man watching a play who all at once jumps onto the stage and tears the masks off of the actors to reveal who they really are. If you think of Marx as this man and the capitalists as the actors, you can begin to understand both what Marx does and why the capitalists are not too pleased with him for doing it.

### **What Is Globalism?**

"Globalization" is but another name for capitalism, but it's capitalism with the gloves off and on a world scale. It is capitalism at a time when all the old restrictions and inhibitions have been or are in the process of being put aside, a supremely self-confident capitalism, one without apparent rivals and therefore without a need to compromise or apologize.

The main features of capitalism in its stage of globalization include: 1) free trade; 2) free movement of capital; 3) the easy relocation of industries across national borders in pursuit of lower labor costs, lower taxes and fewer pollution controls; 4) the rise in influence of financial capital, and the banks and Treasury Ministries that represent it, over industrial and commercial capital, and the institutions that represent them; 5) a spectacular increase in personal debt as a springboard for heightened consumption; 6) growth in the number and size of business mergers both nationally and internationally, followed invariably by radical restructuring and downsizing of the labor force; 7) in the stock market, "financial instruments"--national currencies, insurance, debts, commodity futures, etc.--take over from the production of real goods as the main targets of investment, making the stock market more of a casino than ever; 8) the rapid flow of advertising, public relations, infotainment, and spin into all walks of life, including education; 9) the replacement of many full time jobs with temporary and part-time jobs, and the spread of outsourcing and contract labor; 10) a quantum increase in the speed at which information, particularly information relevant to profit making, moves around the globe; 11) minimal taxes on business; 12) deregulation of business practices that harm workers, consumers and communities; 13) attacks on the economic welfare and security reforms of the past century mainly to reduce business taxes but also to increase the number of workers willing to work for very low wages; 14) privatization of many formerly public institutions and functions (except, of course, the police and the army); 15) the spread of "accountability," quantitatively measurable and interpreted from a managerial point of view, to all sectors of society, including education; 16) the widening of social and economic inequality beyond anything seen in the capitalist era; 17) the weakening of all independent organs of the working class; 18) the weakening of the national state (and therefore of democratic control) in areas where capitalists never wanted the state to exercise much control in the first place; and 19) the creation and strengthening of various international institutions--like the I.M.F., the World Bank, the W.T.O., the Davos Conference (see Chapter 1) and N.A.T.O.--to coordinate, make propaganda for and enforce our still hesitant participation in all these developments. Oh, and 20) exams, lots of exams, everywhere--to prepare the next generation, of course, for

all the new slots that have been created, but also to insure that they perform uncomplainingly once slotted.

Taken together, these developments--which are all internally related--constitute a new stage in capitalism. It is a serious error to think that they have brought us beyond capitalism. If anything, with these changes, our society is more thoroughly capitalist than ever before. After all, more and more of the world is privately owned, more and more wealth is devoted to maximizing profits rather than serving needs (and only serving needs in so far as they maximize profits), more and more people sell their labor power in order to live, more and more objects (ideational as well as material) carry price tags and can be bought in the market, and money and those who have a lot of it have more power and status than ever before. This is capitalism, capitalism with a vengeance, and that's globalization. Which means, too, that the problems associated with globalization cannot be solved--as so many liberals would like to do--without dealing with their roots in the capitalist system.

So, has capitalism changed a lot since Marx's day? Yes, of course. Is Marx's analysis still relevant? Just because of these changes, it is more relevant now than ever.