

# STRANGE LOOPS

## Reagan in Zurich

*Strange Loops was written by friends in Europe during the summer of 1981. It represents a different perspective on the U.S. at this time--an optimistic picture in a number of ways.*

"Let's put America back to work!" With this 'promising' slogan Meese, Baker and Reagan won the presidential election. What do they mean by "back"? They mean a return to that 'golden' period before 1963, before the crisis of work and profits, when America still worked; that is, when U.S. capital could still register a profit growth each year. With Reagan and the 80s, then, we seem to fall back to the 50s, the time before the 'original sin'. Is Reagan the beginning of a new epoch for American capital? A brief look at his program tells us, "No way!" As spectacular as his election and early congressional victories may have seemed, these were merely superficial events.

The 'roll-back' of Keynesian policies had already started with Ford and Carter: welfare payments did not keep up with inflation; the energy price spiral effectively reduced real wages; defense expenditures had begun to rise; public services in the cities were destroyed. In short, the mechanism of surplus value transfer described in The Work/Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse (Midnight Notes, vol. 2, n. 1) had been clearly revealed in the Ford-Carter period. However, the Carter set-up was not credible, neither was his performance as a leading man: he was too cool, too business-like, too colorless. With Reagan capital has finally found the right man for its initiative--a 'real man' of the 50s and a professional, though second-rate, actor. He is the appropriate form for the content of this period.

The political show has now finally become tuned to capitalist 'every day life'. And, in these apocalyptic times, the show is not peripheral. The 'real' politicians and their mediating class organizations are disintegrating, their political space is being dismantled by reality, the Tip O'Neils are finally having their heart attacks. In place of the old political show there is an attempt to directly manage a 'life-style'. In this respect Reagan is important. He embodies a way of living, the 50s day time TV shows, a psychic principle. While Reagan needs the White House to stage his "Father Knows Best" show, Carter, the administrator, could have operated from any corporate suite.

What is the new 'culture' that Reagan embodies? It is the culture of a strange-time-loop, the deduction of the 60s and the shameless return to the 50s. Loathing the failed self-liberation which left one in a vacuum, refusing self-responsibility, into masochistic pleasure of self-discipline, joy in self-destruction, desire of death: these elements, openly or

covertly, are part of it. Reagan, who is something of a national Marquis de Sade wished for by his subjects/victims, presents himself as a return to wholesomeness, to simple things and 'hard work'. The image is used in a morbid way by the adepts of the 'strange loop'.

The fashions of the 50s return as painful irony, as new wave, as punks; crew-cuts, narrow ties, high heels, pointed shoes; plastic, convulsion, faded looks. The 'new elegance' is unhealthy, rickety, buttoned-up, harsh, coded, spastic, near death. Is this a joke on Reagan's new look in the White House or is this its necessary complement? In any case it is the refusal of 'laid back', of the hippy Geist; it is a refusal of health and efficient reproduction; refusal of functional discipline through an absurd self-discipline. We are Devo. This strange loop brings back to America the work ethos, praise of discipline, and the rhetoric of the 50s; but it does not bring America back to work and productivity.

Reagan is the rhetoric of hard work in the White House, but does he work hard? Work ethics, yes; work, no. Reagan, as a proletarian who got rich, symbolizes to all his luckless comrades, "Work no more." Reagan is a lazy rotten president. He gets up late, delegates all toilsome work, likes all social occasions, likes to chat



with all the famous guests from over the world. He's amusing himself in the White House. Champagne flows. The smoking jacket is always in honor as well as the festive bands in military uniform. He presents a cheap movie dream from the 50s. Reagan embodies anything but hard work. Never has the work ethic and discipline been so well ironized. But what is Reagan doing to pacify capital which is suspiciously observing this show?

Reagan speaks to U.S. capital's soul point for point. Like the old country doctor he diagnoses 'tax anxiety syndrome' and prescribes tax cut and concessions. A simple political task, but to engineer a "New Beginning" requires more finesse, even more instinct for cheap effects. Thus the new flavor of 'freedom and adventure' of capital is personified by ex-General Haig. While the true adventure of capital lies in the sum of the small acts of refusal and daily break-down, of decomposition and wear-and-tear, these adventures are invisible, almost inconceivable, and are inappropriate for dramatization; not the material for dreams and nightmares. Again the 50s help. They present the clear, understandable, age-old hereditary enemy: the Soviet Union and World Communist Terrorism. Haig takes them out of the closet. This enemy has a face: bull-like Brezhnev, fat bureaucrats, brutal Soviet generals, tanks in Afghanistan.

Reagan's rendezvous with the 50s becomes concrete. He co-stars with people he can understand, who experienced the same time: Depression, Hot and Cold War, youthful friends as it were. Brezhnev is a risen proletarian like Reagan. They have the same expensive tastes and would have fun together if they met socially.

Enter Haig with his deranged look, his "I'm in control here." He seems capable of risking the Third World War for pure ambition. By contrast Reagan appears strong, calm, capable of holding back such a madman. Their problem is that at the moment the Soviet Union does not even appear that aggressive. The Afgan war was only a clearing of the backyard. And then, beside Haig and a few Cold Warriors, nobody believes in a World Communist Revolution any more, least of all Brezhnev.


Here too Haig is helpful. He warns that the USSR is behind world terrorism. All those movements are directly controlled by Moscow he accuses. From the ETA to the Red Brigades and all the different liberation struggles from South Africa to El Salvador. Poor Russians! Just as well could the Russians have maintained the exposure: where did Quaddafi get his weapons? The text book of this political science fiction is Claire Sterling's *The Terror Network*, the *Summa* of international terrorism. Still, somehow here too Haig is believable in this terror-parade because in 1979 in Brussels he was the target of an attempted assassination.

Yet capital is clear that Haig's spectacle of terror and atomic dance of death is not an acceptable risk. The real risk is neither tax and/or adventurist foreign policy (though they produce thousands of mutilated corpses).

Capital's crucial problem is that there is no leap in sight, just a continuation of the same path, the dismantling of the assembly line, the movement of industry to the South







and West, the further shake up of the working class. Nor does the increasing expenditure for arms open up new vistas. It is a middle industry now: battleships taken from mothball, tanks, and B-1 bombers are not technologically exciting new frontiers. To solve the problem requires taking the Real Risk: an enormous Provocation of the working class.

The massive cuts of welfare rolls, the sabotage of public services, the promotion of private schools, the shut down of public hospitals, the end of CETA, the reinforcement of the police with para-military fascist citizens corps in the neighborhoods. In part, these measures attack the material survival of certain 'marginal groups' directly; this is specifically the case with cuts in food stamps, welfare, meals programs and medicaid. Reagan appears determined to press these attacks to the point where those affected have to make a choice: either explode or rot. Reagan challenges them to create disturbances and is ready to put them down militarily.

The old game of the 60s, Revolt-Reform-Money, can no longer be played. There is no integrating social spending, no army of social workers and programs of ghetto reconstruction. The incident of Miami (still under Carter) pointed to this new line. The blacks cannot get a cent from their unrest. The 'struggle' does not 'pay' any longer. Reagan's risk does not lie simply in the danger of the explosions of the 'classical' ghettos. The victims of the cuts are not only the racial minorities. Whites also feel directly concerned. The reactions of the white neighborhoods were prompt and violent. For example, there were street, highway and tunnel blockades in Boston. In Yonkers laid off firemen set houses on fire themselves and did not put them out. 'Marginal' parts of the working class like part-time workers and jobless academics (who previously found refuge in government sponsored social programs) now have material reasons to defend themselves. Many 60s types could return more furious than ever to the streets soon.

A further risk for capital is the possibility of a definitive collapse of the influential, mediating reformist organization such as the churches among the blacks. The hard sweep destroys their space for playing games and, by the same token, capital loses a negotiating partner. Consider the following scenario. The provoked layers are forced to invent new autonomous organizations of struggle. Here Haig's absurd spectacle of terror shows itself to be Real. In the cities radicalization can arise which will tear down the previous barriers against armed action. After the first wave of demos are struck down, a second can arise which would not be so easy to control militarily. It is towards this possibility that the terrorists propaganda is obviously aimed. Capital seeks to make certain in advance that no autonomous armed resistance can arise from indigenous populations. Should it arise, the conspiracy theory of World Communism would then be used to discredit armed resistance. Certainly Haig would have no trouble in showing international 'fire pullers' at work if armed opposition should arise. The 'White Paper' has already been written. The FBI and CIA has an arrest list waiting in its desk drawer. The Terrorist of 1982 has

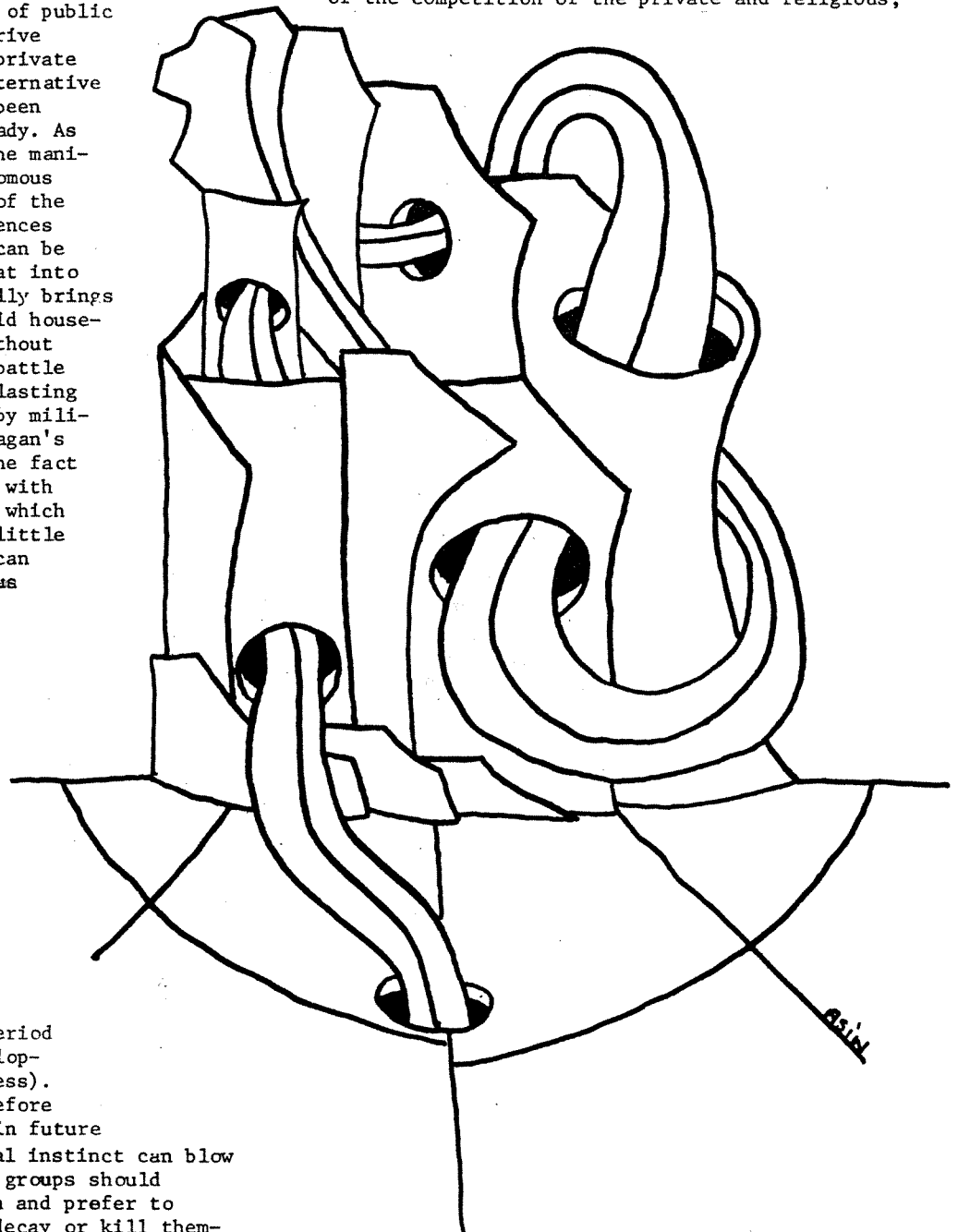
already been made. Naturally centralized terrorism is a trap which working class struggle must avoid, but it is not so easy a matter. The State has the ability to dictate the conditions and it is interested in forcing the struggle to take its most controllable form. However, such armed action has only a propagandistic connection with the actual capillary and autonomous class resistance. Terrorism is, for the state, armed resistance made intelligible to itself. The U.S. state, however, risks getting a much more inconceivable resistance.

The retreat of the state from reproduction, the writing off of entire neighborhoods, the withdrawal of public services and the furthering of private business initiative (in the form of "free enterprise zones") can actually have a reverse effect: the resurgence of self-help organizations. The closing of public schools does not have to drive parents into religious or private schools, there are also alternative school projects that have been functioning for years already. As marginal as they may be, the manifold alternative and autonomous projects in various parts of the U.S. have collected experiences which in such a situation can be played out anew. The retreat into self-help by itself naturally brings yet more weakness and unpaid housework for everybody. But without practical self-help every battle of resistance against the lasting intervention of the state by military means is hopeless. Reagan's risk, therefore, lies in the fact that self-help can combine with radical forms of struggle, which under the pressure of too little money and more repression can cause a very, very dangerous and explosive mixture to arise.

This mixture has already shown itself very successful in the recent youth revolts in Central and Northern Europe. Here too the condition was the breakdown of the mediating organizations and had an alternative self-help background. It is just this brutal attack of Reagan's that can save the alternative movement of America from a long rotting away period (and its irresistible development back into small business). U.S. capital thus stands before an actual risk, an uncertain future on which its entrepreneurial instinct can blow itself out. Even if entire groups should decline Reagan's invitation and prefer to idle away in laziness, to decay or kill them-

selves or allow themselves to die, that would be a defeat of capitalism. Determined resignation and suicide can also be a weapon. A combination of resignation and explosive resistance can actually overload the most developed capitalist instincts for the future. The class would be complete Opaque.

The new U.S. model attempts through strengthening the role of monetary command to avoid the two extremes: resignation and explosion. Instead of the State Embodied, money itself will exercise control also in the reproduction sector. The goal is not the destruction of the reproduction sector, of course, but a more efficient and disciplined reorganization. The dirty sorting machines of all kinds and the Maxwell's demons that have become dizzy shall be purified and refreshed. That is especially clear in the school, where because of the competition of the private and religious,



Catholic and fundamentalist schools, the financial control over students and teachers will be strengthened and the selection under the command of the dollar will be more direct and harder. Under the pressure of fundamentalist and racist groups there will be a willingness to institute a 'voucher' program for schooling that would end local financing of public schools and the public schools themselves. A "free market" control over education, the same holds true in relationship to the destruction of the public hospitals and sanitation workers.

But if Money is to Command, inflation is a loss of the form of command. It is logical that a depreciating dollar can't be a reliable means of control. It continually compromises its own function, which can be achieved through the misuse of credit cards and small loans and 'floats'. Time means gain for every debtor. Money is flowing with the stream of entropy instead of against it. The battle against inflation is therefore not a monetary problem, which even Friedman secretly realizes, but a problem of the reinduction of work discipline and the real command function of Money. Breaking the budget itself does not create inflation, it is how it is broken that is important. For example, when the state is forced to introduce dollars into the reproduction sector it softens command. The social softening of individual risk makes workers generally fresh, lazy, shunning away from responsibility. It is not the dollar amount of the budget deficit that heats inflation but the "misuse" of the money for Safety instead of Command.

Thus it is more than logical to do what Reagan is doing: cut back on social expenses and increase military outlays (which certainly don't work to soften anything). Reagan is, as has been said, a provocation to class resistance, a kind of reagent of capital in the class soup in order to find out where it's at. Capital in its recent years lost its self-feeling and all its mirrors have become unclear. It didn't lack struggles in the mines, public services and atomic plants; however, no general subversive class project, no catastrophe was expressed in all this. Generally speaking these were battles to keep pace with inflation or defensive movements which scarcely opened new fronts. Capital worked without pleasure as did the workers. Carter was really the face of this lack of pleasure, a kind of Charlie Brown at the national level. Reagan provokes, through his classic conservative appearance at the ideological bazaar, all liberals, social democrats, socialists and progressive small businessmen. The old basis of the "European" analysis of U.S. capital, all the parties, coalitions, caucuses were powerfully stirred up. But it is clear that from this side no danger can grow to capital--the traditional left from the remains of the 60s are not able to mobilize new strata of classes in a new way; up to this point, nothing better has occurred to them than a new edition of the old mass demo in Washington (usually on a weekend afternoon). It is true that Reagan has lured this old political stratum from its hole, but not much else has come forth. A centralized representative answer from the 'rational' class middle

is no longer possible. No new politics has been proposed against Reagan for the simple reason that it is not possible to propose any kind of politics against Reagan--only a more inclusive culture, a life style with which to confront Reagan, to answer his provocation on his own level--Reagan can only be played out.

Basically it is a question of two mutually determining and dynamic Games. If Reagan wants to play the upper and lower parts of the working class (the programmers and the part-time masseuses) against the average, because he thinks that there can be no contact between these two extremes, then he is making a mistake. An effective answer to Reagan and the Surplus Value Transfer can only be a 'short circuit' between these two sectors. The first game, the game of the upper workers, is the computer game. The new anti-entropological offensive of capital is assigned to reliable selectors. The second generation of electronic Maxwell's demons can no longer simply be disciplined with dollars.

Because one relies on their creativity, one has to allow them a certain room to play and this must be upholstered with a wage-guarantee. It is here a question of high labor cost, which one cannot devalue simply through firings and unemployment. Nevertheless, precisely this generation of programmers, technicians and intellectuals is in a deep reproduction crisis. It is not a crisis of money income, but a crisis of desires, of the joys of life, motivation, boredom, a culture crisis. Misery reproduces itself as loathing, emptiness and a loss of self beyond material needs. This crisis is not a 'luxury' and it is not just 'imagined', it is as real as hunger, disease and lust. It leads in the same way to mutilations and death through psychic diseases and suicides. There is no absolute ladder of misery, thus the 'civilization crisis' of the upper workers is as threatening as the material crisis of the lower workers.

This crisis found its expressions in the ecology movement, the sects, occultism, art, Zen, yoga, philosophy, mathematics, etc. The movement against this misery cannot be a traditional movement for wages, but it is aimed directly at use values. One of its 'forms of struggle' (between desire and fulfillment there is actually no battle but direct appropriation) is, for example, the Computer Game. The game is appropriation of work time, machine-time and enjoyment of these use values all in one. Seen purely economically the damage done to capital consists of the sums which banks and corporations lose through direct computer embezzlement. In higher organic composition organizations, Time is the most Valuable factor in the Creation of Surplus Value. And it is just at this point that the game begins. Games form the entropological dissolution process in the sorting and control machines. And the model for most of these games is the 'strange loop', paradoxical, reflexive feedback routines which make it possible to play with oneself. The Game is the game with one's alienation. The Game presents itself as the enjoyment of alienation, and becomes therefore a kind of sabotage: the actual vetigo of the demon of Maxwell. The Game is also the dizziness of the unproductive use of time, because it puts the beginning always as the end.

The meta-stability of the Demon approaches instability. From this point of view Reagan can only be understood as an ironic game: an historic Jest.

Yet, the Maxwell's demons and philosophical players of all kinds can sway on 'till they fall over without bringing the system as a whole to a breakdown. Their work is unimportant for the production of Surplus Value. They are replaceable and there are mechanisms for the selection of the selectors. The games can certainly cause accidents but no breakdown. The Game is simply too Evanescent. Therefore the other 'game' is needed, the game of the streets, of the alleys, of physical confrontation with those who control the production of Absolute Surplus Value. This Game is called Riot, Looting, Disruption of the physical circulation of Constant and Variable Capital (blockading the terminals extracting Surplus Value: department stores, banks, loan offices). Dysinformation without Disruption has little effect, Disruption without Dysinformation is too quickly recognized and easily handled. Yet this too is not a political alliance, no united front politics, certainly no organizational 'Proposal'.

The overlay of the two Games, Disruption and Dysinformation, can only appear as a new culture, as a kind of transversal culture. It can arise as music, as fashion, life style--as the praxis of strife. IT CANNOT APPEAR AS A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE WITH A FUTURE--in this case it would no longer be dysinformative, but intelligible to capital. This culture is certainly ironic in that it puts the lower for the higher and vice versa. In Europe it has brought highly paid engineers and day laborers living on an existential minimum together in the street in physical confrontation with the police. It is the High Sign between the programmers and the street kids. They need one another in order to win--because without internal breakdown, the military machine can no longer be successfully attacked.

The illusion of the 'consumer society' which has until now held the classes in competition is increasingly fleeting. The Poor no longer believe in their Rise. There will no longer be a battle for 'simple prosperity'. Even the Polish workers, who in this respect would have cause for illusion, understand this---the struggle to Rise has become meaningless. Although the 50s have returned there won't be anymore 60s. Blacks and other 'minorities' will no longer come out for Civil Rights and Equal Opportunities. After the experience of the last decade they can only struggle for the abolition of all Rights and all Career Possibilities, or they would rather rot. The 'old values' live only in the Average sector of the working class and it is exactly this sector, paradoxically enough, that Reagan must try to eliminate. In this sense either there are no longer any future possibilities, neither Utopian nor real, or there are many futures at the same time, a whole handful of lifestyles which tear at the centralizing Future of Capital, as it were.

The decentralization of space (through computerization) must be followed by a decentralization of time. It is exactly the refusal of all Homo-

geneity that can become the strength of the transvestite double-Game. All this sounds 'Abstract' doesn't it? But it cannot be more concrete. What makes it abstract is only the 'inborn' drive of the old politicians who want to force New possibilities into old Patterns. These Patterns are, for example, reproposing Upward mobility, 'concrete' demands, Particular forms of struggle, Organization directed towards the mechanism of representation. That is considered Concrete, yet when one has seen 10,000 people on the streets of Zurich demonstrating merely against their 'dissatisfaction' and these same people are taking some physical risk for this, then one learns how concrete the Abstract can be.

Naturally it might seem that Opposition to Reagan's cutting of social programs is more Concrete. But we know that this is just a 'Jest', Reagan and his measures will not be able to resolve any of the Fundamental Problems of U.S. capital. The experiences with Reaganomics, such as the Laffer curve or the 'rational expectations' theory of fighting inflation, more and more unmask him and his new charlatans. Reagan's smile has already lost its fascination after a few months, even for U.S. capital, with the exception perhaps of the Defense industry. Self hypnosis is a dangerous political method because the smallest blink can destroy the trance.

REAGAN MAKES IT CLEAR THAT FOR A LONG TIME CAPITAL HAS NOT HAD A THEORY OF ACTION NOR TACTICS, but only continues to exist in that it does SOMETHING and thus does not cease to exist. Capital's brain is today probably one of the largest collections of entropy in the system.

Although Reagan's Show gives the illusion of a forceful will, decisiveness, clarity and safety, the motto for capital (and for us) has long been: EVERYTHING you know is WRONG, EVERYTHING you do is right. While the quantum physicists eagerly search for the 'glue-on' which can unite the elementary forces, Society becomes Fragmented, the forces of the system Disintegrate and only a Liar like Reagan can hold together the fragments by means of mind magic, rhetoric and Apocalyptic threats. Not for long however. The rags will soon be flying around the ears of this Fooled Fool. Not even a Russian tank will be able to save him.

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Strange Loops places much focus on "high tech" workers, who are interpreted as actually or potentially disaffected and thus a subject of struggle. In the U.S. at this time we cannot view the mass of "high tech" workers as disaffected: their relatively high wages, degree of "creative" work, often flexible work schedule and orientation, fascination with the technology itself, and the space and resources to have "hobbies" - all add up, mostly, to relatively reliable workers for capital. One area of exception has been around nuclear power and weapons.

Nonetheless, disaffection is by no means impossible. In the not-distant future, we can expect a "shake-out" of the industry which will "rationalize" it with negative consequences for the workstyles of many of its personnel. Simultaneously, the number of workers entering the





field will begin to outstrip the number needed as the industry enters a "degradation of labor" phase. The results will be intensification and rigidification of labor, wage stagnation, and the ensuing need to reproduce one's work self in more intense and desperate circumstances. Disaffection must follow.

The "strange loop" in the working class is the connection between "high techies" and "marginals". What must be examined here are the questions of lifestyle and culture. Given the situation of non-work or marginal work for the "marginals" and the prevalence of "hobbies" for the "techies", the unifying theme is that life exists largely outside of work - even though the "techies" are able to incorporate a certain amount of play into work (a fact which will tend to disappear). Our question is, to what extent is "non-work" time a unifying force not just between two extremes of the class, but that runs through the whole class. Strange Loops indicates some lines of investigation of the forms of work refusal and the primacy of life-styles

rather than work as unifying class. What can be politically generalized in these refusals? Will the refusal of work generate a set of struggles in various sectors of the class which will not only generalize into the destruction of the new right, but also something new for the working class? Or will we only have the "choice" of warmed over, newly austere, social democracy?

To some extent the personnel of the anti-nuclear movement represented the unification of the two poles: people who were self-marginalized but potentially high tech in terms of background and accessibility to training, etc. They were not much able, however, to generalize themselves or to move substantially the elements of each pole they incorporated. Nonetheless, they may be partly a lightening rod conducting the electricity of the strange loops in the future.

However, without strange loops in the class we cannot win substantial victories. The odd circuits and strange connections between and among various class sectors is vital to undermining and outflanking capitalist command and planning.