

Alienation and had heard about him from former students and American marxists. I expected an east coast professor, dapper in bow tie and herring bone jacket. Instead, under the hot South Arabian sun, I found this jovial but unconventional figure, in T-shirt and straw hat, quizzing the state officials on the role of women in the farm and on the real degree of local democracy. Not for him the banalities of the *Rude Pravo* correspondent.

Oilman took an enthusiastic and critical part in the PDRY celebrations. He even donated some volumes by Wilhelm Reich to the new university library. But then, in 1977, he was most keen on his new project of Marxist pedagogy, the board game *Class Struggle* which, as a kind of *anti-Monopoly*, was to bring the message of Marx and Engels to a wider audience than had so far been possible through normal teaching and publishing methods. *Class Struggle* would, like the Jesuits, get to the kids when they were young; it would inspire those locked in the wage-slave situation; it would show that socialist struggle could be fun. *Homo ludens* would merge with the militant.

Next time I met Bertell the game was out, and had received widespread favourable publicity. But it was evident that all was not going according to plan. There had been an unresolved conflict with strikers at a major department store, Brentano's, who wanted Oilman and his associates to black the shop. Oilman himself had become involved in a draining conflict with the University of Maryland who had appointed him head of their political science department and then cancelled the offer: not even references from his former teachers, Isaiah Berlin and Zbigniew Brzezinski, could clinch it for him. And his Greenwich Village flat bore all the signs of the left-wing cadre under stress: instead of the piles of unsold party papers in the hallway, here it was row after row of unsold *Class Struggles*. The home-becomes-warehouse syndrome, familiar to every drained purveyor of the revolutionary truth, had come in a big and bulky way.

This book is the story of what happened, and what went wrong. It has elements of tragedy and comedy familiar to all who have mixed their revolutionary politics with the capitalist market: the bills that never get paid, the humiliations of retailers who don't want the product, the growing pressure on friendships and family, the frustration at the inability to convert theoretical 'understanding' of the capitalist system into profit or even returns; above all

the realisation that once again and in a new and initially more hopeful dimension the masses are *not* rallying.

Oilman tells his story with humour, a complete lack of self-importance, but a trace of anger, sadness and regret. In the end the problem was simple: *Class Struggle* did not sell enough. Between 1979 and 1982 it sold around 180,000 copies — in US, Italian and German editions. No mean feat. But not enough to cover the debts or recompense Bertell, his wife Paule, and his sorely tried friends for the nightmare they had been through. The maintenance and promotion costs, the chicaneries of other businessmen, the amateurish mistakes of the promotion group themselves, and, beyond it all but clear as an evening skyline, political prejudice at the point of sale combined to prevent *Class Struggle* from breaking into the big league.

In a sense, this is a tale of a double defeat — of Oilman the playing man, and Oilman the Marxist professor. He had, as he describes it, overestimated the willingness of capitalism to concede in order to preserve its liberal image. The buyers at Bloomingdales said maybe, and then no. The judges in Maryland after long and costly delays, found in favour of the university authorities who revoked his contract. Oilman may also have been to some extent a victim of the onset of the new cold war climate: many of those marginal judgements by buyers could have gone the other way a decade or even five years earlier.

The underlying problems of the story are evident enough to him. One was that the question of combating capitalism through the game was far more difficult than he initially imagined: games are big business, both as commodities and as ideology. For that very reason, the entrances are well-guarded. *Monopoly* means what it says. The second problem is that despite his aspirations, Bertell is not a Marxist businessman: he is a Marxist trying to go into business, but a million miles from the likes of Engels, Parvus, and Carrillo who have at some point in the history of the socialist movement sat in the capitalist's chair. In temperament too Bertell did not have the hard skin that has enabled many a former, or remaining, stalwart of the communist movement to amass a fortune later in life. His own personality and values are irremediably antipathetic to capitalism and what sustains it. And this is, of course, his greatest virtue.

Fred Halliday



CLASS STRUGGLE IS THE NAME OF THE GAME, True Confessions of a Marxist Businessman
Bertell Oilman

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I first met Bertell Oilman on a state farm in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. We were both part of that central institution of the post-revolutionary world, the *delegation*, and were visiting the PDRY on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of independence, the British withdrawal from Aden of 1967. I knew his classic work