# Ch 6 - I Want to Conquer the World

There really is no easy way of telling you this, but I am extremely doubtful that I or anyone else can point to any concrete plans of action to go about changing the mindset of a whole nation, let alone the global attitude towards peace. That’s just not how this works—capitalism now stretches beyond the limits of the Earth; bringing about a change in the system is not something that’s going to happen overnight. It could happen relatively faster if violence were the key to its initiative, but I hope and suspect it will be slowly chipped away instead by decades of realization that it just doesn't work.

No, the actions I’m referring to for the purposes of this essay are mostly metaphysical in nature—the kind that you have to internalize and exude with your held values and beliefs. I will talk a bit about some of the collective actions we can and might take in chapters 8 & 9, but these references to action imply those you can take to become a better person.

A lot of contemporary ideologies are an awesome amalgamation of different values and beliefs from all over the world and among many different periods in history. The tools we invented to make life more efficient allowed for us to be doing more in a given day—this has eventually led to a rapid increase in the amount of content we are able to consume. Because of this great complexity of ideas, no one really aspires to a single person’s projected worldview. People draw their ideologies from what they experience, whether that be in the real world or the world of fiction.

Fiction is a tricky business for, now more than ever, it is easy to be consumed by negative ideologies centered around alienation and dissent. Proper fiction is used to parody or ironize a specific value or belief, but the line between truth in two stories is not inherently distinguishable.

It would be wrong of me to try and argue what I believe without having read or consumed any means of comparison. Perspective is a tricky thing and, if you rely too much on your own, you will inevitably miss the point because you simply couldn't see it from where you were. This is partly why philosophy texts are so confusing to most, because they all draw from other texts of which you will probably need some context.

A primary goal of this project aims to display philosophy to be more approachable than other traditional forms—sorta like how online content creators like Philosophy Tube or hbomberguy operate. Of course, they too reference other people’s work because that’s how you build a more complete picture of your own beliefs.

In this chapter, I will be reflecting on Albert Camus’ essay, *The Rebel*, to try and understand the action of change, as well as Mark Fisher’s book, *Capitalist Realism*, to see how we might apply such action to bring about change to our lives.

Before diving into *The Rebel*, I think a little context is needed to understand where Camus is coming from with all this. Having been born in French Algeria and working hard to oppose Nazi occupation in Europe, Camus was rightfully disgusted with the individuals that assisted the Nazi genocides.1 After the liberation of Paris in 1944, Camus was an advocate of what was essentially a purge: “thousands of collaborators – from government officials to journalists to shaven-headed women alleged to have cavorted with German occupiers – had been treated to summary justice in courts, on French streets, sometimes by little better than lynch mobs,” writes Feldman.2 Shortly after, Camus had been criticized by “catholic intellectual” François Mauriac, condemning the purge.3 Camus publicly responded, claiming that the severity of the time “forces us to destroy a living part of this country in order that we may save its very soul.”4 After having repeated his support for the purge following another plea from François Mauriac, Camus became weary as the number of deaths from the purge continued to grow, long after the battle had been won.5 Writing publicly in early 1945, Camus admitted he was indeed wrong for his support of the purge, saying, “we see now that M. Mauriac was right.”6 This realization made in him a complete transformation of heart, for Camus felt deeply for the lives that were lost, seeing that the spirit of what France had been fighting for had become corrupt. After a tragic and fatal car wreck, a quote from a piece he was working on, *La Peste* [*The Plague*], was found:

“We should serve justice because our condition is unjust, increase happiness and joy because this world is unhappy. Similarly, we should sentence no one to death, since we have been sentenced to death ourselves.”7

L'HOMME RÉVOLTÉ

Camus published works in cycles of 3; *The Rebel* was a philosophical essay that existed along with his novel, *The Plague,* and his play, *The Misunderstanding*. Together, they center around the idea of rebellion. *The Rebel* was written after the events of the purge and the regret that Camus felt for being a part of it. What follows is the morality of rebellion in response to held beliefs. I'm going to work somewhat out of order from what Camus presents to us in *The Rebel*, with the intent to slow it down and make it more clearly relatable. Just know that the/a “rebel” is an individual—an archetype for one to insert themselves into.

So far, we've established that because life has a meaning, one ought to embrace the absurdity of the world and seek out or create one’s own meaning. The affirmation that “yes, I am suffering,” in turn is the realization that so too does the rest of humanity. “Therefore the first step for a mind overwhelmed by the strangeness of things,” writes Camus, “is to realize that this feeling of strangeness is shared with all [of us] and that the entire human race suffers from the division between itself and the rest of the world.”8 From there on it becomes contradictory to the very nature of oneself to deny the suffering of any being, because in doing so, one severs their connection to solidarity, leading to a life of isolation. In the assertion of a superior people, an inferior out-group is born and subsequently creates the need for a rebellion against itself for the sake of those deemed inferior. For this reason, Camus argues that rebellion in the name of wicked principles is doomed to fail in one of two ways; either being “crushed by bloodshed, or the hideous prospect of atomic suicide.”9 There are *no* cases in which the established few come out on top of those they oppress. Because the instinct to rebel is human nature, oppression will always be opposed. The elite then will either be dethroned or, in their nihilistic attempt to consume everything, they wind up dethroning humanity as a whole.

Camus spends much of the essay laying out historical context to revolutions past and the examples that, in one way or another, failed because it either deserted the original values that it rebelled on, or because it was tyrannical from the onset. Tyranny, to Camus, will always end in bloodshed—humanity can be made a slave, but if pushed enough, a value will be realized in which enough is enough. In the realm of the past and in our own history, “the revolutionary is simultaneously a rebel or he is not a revolutionary, but a policeman, or a bureaucrat, who turns against the rebellion.”10 Revolution is a tricky thing—who’d’ve thought? One, if established or carried out in ways contradictory to the values it fights for (or in this case, on the basis of nihilism), will never reach the level of solidarity it so desires. To Camus, it is only the intersection of an acceptance of nihilism *and* the affirmation of a value common to *all* of humanity, that rebellion can succeed.

Action is easily enough achieved, but in the course of history, there has been so much bloodshed. For what? Which revolution succeeded in bringing about solidarity for their people? Lenin? I don’t think so. After gaining power, have any of them actually governed or led their people in the name of the values they professed? The moment they compromised their values for their cause, they lost any claim to virtue and through those they oppressed, initiated their own downfall.

Camus professes that action is historically messy. So when our time comes, when we rebel, in whatever fashion that may be, what are we to fight for? Rebellion need not be on the scales of nations—rebellion in ourselves can simply be the refusal to play by the rules. A refusal of a request gone too far; a “refusal to be treated as an object and to be reduced to simple historical terms” because we are more than just another fleeting life in the history of humanity; “It is the affirmation of a nature common to all men, which eludes the world of power.”11 There isn’t a meaning to overall life, but there is *personal meaning* in yours and in mine, and *that* is what we must fight for. We fight so that all of us have an opportunity to live a meaningful life—to flourish, together.

HOW DO YOU FIGHT A GHOST?

Way back in chapter 3, we briefly went over how capitalism is not grounded in concrete structures, but rather has become this evasive specter; it persists even in the way we think and interact. This system of value and production has melded into the exercise of government and in doing so, it converts everything it touches into an objective calculation of worth. Suddenly, *everything* becomes a part of “the market,” and *nothing* can survive without it.

The forces of capitalism elude most individuals because there never was any other alternative. This is an essential feature of capitalism—you have to rely on it to get by. Human rights like food, water, and housing were assigned a monetary value and suddenly, “Hey, we could save money by cutting this or that corner…” Because of just how much value is assigned to money and the subsequent comfort afforded by the accumulation of it, greed becomes baked into our way of living.

Democracy under capitalism allows the fatal compromise of cost versus benefit to plague its decision-making. The very act of governing becomes a perversion of ethics by allowing critical decisions to be made based on how much money it would cost. We learned from Camus that we humans aren't very good at learning from history, nor are we particularly good at thinking outside of ourselves, of the long-term. This is partially how we’ve allowed the climate crisis to get as bad as it is.

Naturally, rebellion is born out of the very hands of the oppressors. But this time, even action seems hopeless.12 Overthrowing the government is not a goal most Americans believe to be achievable, so the alternative is then to force the politics to change—via protest. The aim of protesting is not to challenge the system as a whole, but to “mitigate its worst excesses.”13 However, the sheer complexity of capitalism as we know it today means there are built-in redundancies at every corner—bureaucracy. To hash off the worst parts, you have to work from within, slashing your way through a jungle of other bullshit that's in the way of achieving that specific goal.

In scrambling what it means to achieve progress, opposition to capitalism is ideologically scattered. The amorphous blob that is capitalism consumes its opposition and makes it a part of its inner functions. Fisher claims that anti-capitalism can thrive within capitalist realism.14 By the way, “capitalist realism” is the acknowledgment of the underlying reality of capital and its functions, not just what it *seems like* or *ought to be*. The creation of anti-capitalism within capitalism seems paradoxical or oxymoronic, but Fisher’s example of this in action is the Disney film, *Wall-E*.15 In essence, the film captures the reality of capitalism in that it demonstrates the innate danger it poses to the survival and well-being of humanity, but any support of the film is not support of anti-capitalism, rather, it’s ultimately support for the Disney corporation. Supporting the film for its cute and penetratingly real message only supports the structures of reflexivity *within* the system. “Far from undermining capitalist realism, this gestural anti-capitalism actually reinforces it.”16 There is a proven incentive to appeal to anti-capitalist movements in the promise that there is a market for it. This is precisely why it is so hard to act against capitalism and why many of us have simply given up hope. So... if you can't beat the specter into submission, what can you do?

If capitalism is invulnerable to physical attacks, then maybe a blazing condemnation of its being will work... While hurling insults at a ghost is humorous to imagine, Fisher actually claims that, more than anything else, capitalist realism only has one weakness; *it's bad at its job*; “Capitalist realism can only be threatened if it is shown to be in some way inconsistent or untenable.”17 Easier summarized than put into action, I'm afraid... Think about a ghost—how do you go about trying to convince people to see the damage it's causing? It’s a ghost! Some people will see right through it and not even know it was there! This of course isn't a perfect analogy, but people’s perspectives are scattered and it's hard to get enough of them to realize what’s happening, especially if there are more and more factors that get involved. Fisher explains, “an ideological position can never be really successful until it is naturalized, and it cannot be naturalized while it is still thought of as a value rather than a fact.”18 Bernie Sanders’ presidential campaigns have opened people’s minds about the possibilities of better ways to handle the system, but it will never be successful unless enough people believe he's right. And so, rebellion against capitalism, to Fisher, is not a call to arms, it's an appeal to humanity.

The dependence on extrapolating the riches of the Earth and the resistance to do anything about the consequences it poses is something that angers my generation tremendously. Fisher poses 3 realities that expose the critical weaknesses of capitalism: environmental catastrophe, mental health, and bureaucracy.19 Environmental catastrophe is being realized in slow motion to us here on the ground. Especially in affluent countries, we have the potential to deal with changes in infrastructure and in prevention, so we don’t see the worst of what is already happening. Climate change exposes the greed at the base of our vast system of exchange. We can already see that “being green” has become a valuable marketing strategy and while more and more “responsible” companies are being born, the reliance on over-production still remains. Certainly, a great number of my generation are already aware that compromises will have to be made to our lifestyles since capitalism is perfectly willing to destroy the planet in order to please the market.20 You might argue that this is the fault of the government, but what exactly has the government been doing about this? Their interest is always and will forever be concerned with maintaining the stability of the market. Since the operations of capital have been absorbed into the functions of government, democratic services will always side with making sure that, however we respond, the primary goal is making sure that the health of “the economy” is not impeded—even as countless innocent people die day after day.

As the extent of the damage posed by environmental catastrophe grows, more and more of our youth are losing hope in their futures. The prophecy of societal collapse has been foretold and now all we can do is sit and wait for it to happen. This is one of many ways in which capitalist realism impacts mental health—in “treating [it] as if it were a natural fact, like weather.”21 Mental illnesses are an epidemic of systemic pressures and are fueled by the absurdity of our times. Fisher explains that by treating mental illness on a case-by-case basis, or “treating them as if they were caused only by chemical imbalances in the individuals’ neurology and/or by their family background,” the underlying root of “social systemic causation is ruled out.”22 Depression, anxiety, ADHD, etc. have been painted to seem like unfortunate toils of individual minds, but no one seems to be ready to challenge the assumption that the environment they’ve been forced to rely on has nothing to do with their ailment. We have become complacent with the gross system of neglect that ultimately forms and shapes our personalities and in allowing that, we essentially grant it access to untold future generations as well. The significant challenges our generation faces now is not a farce located in increased awareness and diagnoses—there is increasing evidence that social conditions may very well be the leading cause for mental illness.23 We are born into a world in which we are no more than a means to someone else’s end. Our happiness is supposedly guaranteed after a life of productivity and social usefulness, but actively dismissed until we get there... Yet we grow increasingly worried if retirement is even an option for our futures.

In the refusal to treat mental illness as a problem of systemic pressures, we forgo dealing with the root of the problem and instead have chosen to be complacent in the continuation of inflicting generations of damage. Mental health reveals the core tenant of capitalist realism, in abstracting the individual from the whole and insisting on individual points of origin for adverse behavior. In shifting focus away from itself, capitalist realism aims to condemn persons for faults they had no agency in developing.

Passion is pushed to the wayside as social pressures convince us to chase after the abstract idea of “power,” providing ourselves stability in making other men fear what you could achieve with the power you’ve fought for. This is baked into our lifestyles and our learned desires along the perversion of education in a world of increasing accessibility to a boundless source of knowledge. Education is a major factor in the early development of people’s lives and yet we allow it to abuse our children year after year. Nothing is more responsible to the poisoning of education in capitalist realism than through bureaucracy.

Bureaucracy, along with being infuriating to spell, is infuriating to deal with. The insistence upon the strict and non-negotiable categorization of anything and everything it touches has become an effective method of warding off authentic displays of individualism. Whether it be a technical support call center, redundant paperwork, or credit scores, bureaucracy is poised to present evidence of efficiency through the production of busy work designed to postpone and deter creativity or systemic change. The decentralization of bureaucracy has footed the bill away from the inefficiencies of the system itself onto the shoulders of innocent people so that wherever you look, there’s always a manager up the ranks to speak to instead.24 In the US, school curriculum is entirely based upon preparing students for an antiquated, ineffectual set of tests that determine a significant portion of your later life.25 This is bureaucratic bullshit at its finest, giving an illusory goal to fill an illusory need. Students know their test scores do not matter, teachers know their curriculums are whitewashed and unable to affect critical thinking. The bureaucracy of contemporary education leads students to become inattentive, uninspired, and uncritical of their surroundings. It reinforces the structures of capitalist realism, yet it remains such a glaring example of its inefficiencies to really get anything done. It is inefficient insofar that it educates simply on the basis of repetition and obedience. Action in its contemporary form has been made almost impossible to succeed. So what exactly are we acting for? On what principles and why?