

Money screws you up

In the sphere of ideas one of the more fruitful results of May 1968 was the spread, in France and elsewhere, of the criticism of the commodity as representing the reduction of useful things to objects of commerce and of social and personal relationships to commercial ones. With commodity production, work ceases to be the creative activity of people producing needed useful things and becomes mere labour turning out articles of commerce for sale on a market. People cease to be related to each other as members of a community, whether democratic or hierarchical, and become mere economic units related to each other only through money as buyers and sellers of some object or other of commerce.

This criticism of the extreme commercialisation of society that capitalism involves goes back to the beginning of the 19th century and to the Romantic tradition that then came into being as a reaction to the ravages of emerging industrial capitalism. Already in 1840 Thomas Carlyle was denouncing the situation where “cash payment has become the sole nexus of man to man”. In France in the 1960s and 1970s this sort of criticism of capitalism was expressed in particular by the Situationists who gave a prominent place to the passive consumption of commodities as a feature of the “spectacular society” they were denouncing. The commodity was considered as something undesirable that ought to be done away with.

But what exactly is a commodity? A commodity is, basically, a product of labour and nature that has been produced with a view to being sold. It is, in other words, an object of commerce, an item of wealth that is bought and sold. A commodity is not simply a useful thing, some part of nature transformed so as to be capable of satisfying some human need. It is this, but this is not its essential characteristic.

The essential characteristic of a commodity is that it is a part of nature that has been transformed primarily with a view to being exchanged for some other product. An item of wealth produced for this purpose acquires, in addition to what might be called its natural usefulness, or use-value, an exchange value which is the amount of other commodities that it can exchange for. Commodity-production gives rise to money, prices and buying and selling, and achieves its highest form in capitalism where literally everything can, and generally does, become an object of commerce.

Consumer society

Ironically, or at least it may appear so to some, this criticism of capitalism was provoked, not by capitalist conditions of primary poverty and destitution but by the prolonged period of capitalist prosperity that eventually followed the last world war.

Post-war reconstruction and the expansion of world markets led to full employment and, as a consequence, to rising living standards for wage and salary workers. That workers became materially better off over this period is a fact that cannot be denied. A majority did acquire a whole range of consumer durables that are now taken for granted but which before the war were luxuries enjoyed only by the rich, such things as fridges, washing machines, televisions and of course cars. People were also able to build up savings, go on holidays abroad, and more and more of them to acquire their own house. All this would have been unthinkable before the war and no doubt goes a

long way towards explaining why people have accepted capitalism over the last forty years, particularly as the “socialist” alternative appeared to be represented by the Russian state capitalist empire where it was evident that ordinary workers were much worse off.

Defenders of capitalism were able to present their system as a “consumer society” geared to providing an ever-rising standard of living for ordinary people. Critics, however, began to point to the social costs of such a growth-oriented, market society. These criticisms are neatly summed up in the titles of three books written by Vance Packard, an American journalist, in the late 1950s: *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), *The Status Seekers* (1959) and *The Waste Makers* (1960).

The first was a description of the methods employed by advertisers to try and manipulate people into buying things by using brainwashing techniques derived from psychology. The second, perhaps the weakest, described how people strove to acquire consumer goods as much as a status symbol as for their usefulness, while the third exposed how manufacturers employed techniques such as planned obsolescence to maintain the market for their goods.

Packard was an investigative journalist rather than a social philosopher but in his books are to be found all the themes that have been developed at a more philosophical and theoretical level by others, particularly in continental Europe and those in its tradition like Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm. For example, the theme that in capitalism the needs which the market is supposed to be geared to meeting are not our real needs but artificial ones created by capitalist manipulation of our psychology, and the theme that a growth-oriented society involves a waste of resources and an unbalanced relationship with the rest of nature.

Such a theory of the commodity provided the basis for a modern criticism of capitalist society. The needs which a commodity is supposed to satisfy are denounced as false needs. The advertising required to create these false needs is denounced for commercialising society and turning it into one huge marketplace. And the consumption of materials and energy to produce the goods to satisfy these false needs is denounced as waste placing an intolerable burden on nature.

This theory does have some attraction, even some substance, but when the question of what sort of society should replace capitalism arises, as it has to, weaknesses appear. Nearly all of the exponents of the theory, while certainly critical of the market-motivated, growth-oriented society that is capitalism, and indeed providing some trenchant criticisms of it, turn out to be in favour of retaining some degree of commodity production and exchange.

Truly human society

One example is Jeremy Seabrook. In *The Myth of the Market*, published last year, he powerfully criticises the spread of market values for “leading to social disintegration in the West, and in the Third World to the destruction of indigenous cultures that are the only surviving examples of how people can truly live in harmony with their environment”. Only he then ends lamely by denying that the way-out is to get rid of the market and the production of useful things as commodities:

“The issue is not so much one of going ‘beyond’ the market economy, but rather of reducing it to a minimal, functional level in our lives, putting it in its (necessary) place” (page 33).

Another example is the Canadian writer William Leiss in his book *The Limits to Satisfaction*, subtitled “On Needs and Commodities”, that was first published in 1976. After criticising capitalism for inciting insatiable needs, he speaks only about the “limitation of the sphere of commodity exchange” (British edition, page 116) and of the need to “lessen the importance of commodities as factors in the satisfaction of human needs” (page 122):

“There is nothing inherently evil in commodities and market exchanges as such, and there is no reason to believe that it would be desirable to extirpate them completely. There is cause for concern only when commodity exchange tends to become the exclusive mode for the satisfaction of needs” (page 117).

Such observations show Leiss to be a superficial critic of the commodity. Clearly, his objection is not to the exchange-value aspect of the commodity as a product of labour and nature that has become an object of commerce, but merely to the fact that, in his view, most commodities have now ceased to be real use-values since they are being produced to satisfy manipulated needs. Abolish this aspect of the modern commodity and, for him, commodity production and exchange become acceptable.

What critics like Leiss of the commodity as an expression of false needs have overlooked is that there is another reason for doing away with commodity production and exchange: that this will end the domination of production by blindly-operating economic laws which impose the accumulation of exchange-value as the primary objective of production.

Wherever wealth is produced for sale on a market - wherever, that is, there is commodity-production - economic forces are unleashed which come to dominate production and orient it away from satisfying people's needs. The operation of these laws means that production is not subject to human control, with the result that it is not human values that are paramount in society, but market values, commercial values, the cash nexus.

If a truly human society is to be created where we can relate to each other as members of a real community instead of as isolated atoms colliding on the market place, then the commodity-form must disappear completely. This is not a question, as Leiss suggests, of the “extirpation” of commodity-production, money and buying and selling as things that are “inherently evil”, of using coercive means to prevent commodity exchange from taking place; what is involved is creating the conditions (common ownership of productive resources by the whole community) in which it has no sense. The death of the commodity will be the beginning of a truly human society existing in harmony with the rest of nature.

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