Capitalism... The Sick Society

Hardly a week passes now without capitalism giving rise to some event - real, fictional or imaginary - which generates a debate about violence - though, as usual, the system itself is rarely indicted.

The Mail on Sunday called it "The sick face of British fashion" when Wayne Hemingway, the millionaire who runs the fashion house, Red or Dead, had two fashion models fighting on the catwalk, another brandishing a bloody kitchen knife, and another licking blood from the edge of scissors.

Hemingway defended his show on the grounds that he was making a statement about "the future prospects for the world if we continue to abuse the environment and allow the French to carry on nuclear testing".

He's making money

No such defences are offered for explicitly violent films such as Tarantino's Reservoir Dogs or recent gory episodes of the British television series, Cracker, or an increasing torrent of novels and comic books dealing with gruesome murder, rape and torture. All of these have been produced as entertainment—to give pleasure—and to make a profit. In this fashionable splurge of fictional violence, Hemingway's claim that he is expressing a social conscience sounds a bit specious when he is making so much money.

It is the fact that such cruelty and destructiveness appears to be gratuitous, so pornographic, that gives religious evangelists the opportunity to talk loudly of wickedness and the work of the devil in our irreligious modern society. In one sense, they are partly right. Long-standing moral prohibitions against a wide range of activities from gambling to unusual sexual gratifications certainly have been pushed aside in the name of freedom in the past few years.

In theory, capitalism today is a much more tolerant society than it used to be, but in fact the level of intolerance between individuals has increased alarmingly. In some ways we have more liberty than our parents and grandparents, but that liberty has turned into licentiousness on numerous occasions, as the tabloid papers lose no opportunity to report. For reasons like this, freedom and tolerance are ridiculed and condemned by the "law and order" enthusiasts. "Right wing" politicians attack the proposals of "left wing" reformers as being naive or unrealistic. As with the religious evangelists, the hard-line conservatives have more truth on their side than their opponents.

It is true that in twentieth century capitalism liberties are frequently abused and generosity is exploited. It is true that peace and prosperity for everyone is a utopian illusion within this society. However, this says nothing about freedom and tolerance themselves. What it does throw harsh light upon is the fundamental nature of the society we live in. The very structure and day-to-day management of capitalism is designed to prevent to prevent peace and prosperity for everyone from coming about. Whatever capitalism may say about itself, liberty, equality and fraternity are not the values it develops.

The power of the capitalist class in Britain, as elsewhere, was established by bloody revolution and violence. The sort of society this produces is therefore one of oppression and exploitation. The working class is ruled, not only by law, police, prisons and armed forces, but by its dependence upon working for the capitalist class and upon the amount of money workers receive in wages and salaries. Because money controls freedom.

Bottled anger
But money also hides the oppressors. With a money system and a market in which everything is for sale, the homeless and destitute cannot point to anyone who is denying them somewhere to live or a share in the mountains of goods on sale.

The unemployed can feel inadequate when they are rejected in the labour market. And those of us who are lucky enough to escape the extremes of poverty which pervades capitalist society can only feel frustrated and stultified at having to spend the whole of our active lives working hard just to stay alive.

All these aspects of our oppression and exploitation produce anger. The more irrational the situation—such as unemployment for some and overwork for others, or sleeping in cardboard boxes only yards away from the most opulent hotels—the greater the anger.

Capitalist society demands that we should "bottle it up" and suffer in silence, be subdued and ashamed if we are destitute. For those who hold this point of view, the smashing of windows in bus shelters and telephone kiosks is seen as "mindless violence". The battering of old ladies in the street or the, often fatal, street fights outside pubs and clubs are regarded as the work of delinquents who need violent treatment in boot camps or prisons to cure them. The fact is that these criminals have already grown up immersed in violence. More violence will not change them.

There is a direct correlation between poverty and the committing of violent crime by juveniles. And the crucible in which such behaviour is smelted is the nuclear family. The commonest pattern is for the low-paid or unemployed rather his frustration and anger through violence towards his wife in front of the children, and for both parents to nag and thrash the children irritably and inconsistently.

**One-parent families**

One-parent families have an even worse record of producing violent youngsters—but only when they are also poor. Then they are usually even poorer than poor two-parent families. Robert Thompson, one of Jamie Bulger's killers, came from a poor, violent, one-parent home. His mother once knocked a man down with a single punch in her local pub.

It is in the family, also, that our sexual behaviour and feelings are moulded. Like the tendency to be violent, aberrant sexual behaviour, once established, tends to persist throughout life. If sexual feelings have been associated repeatedly with experience of shame or violence or any other strong influence, these experiences remain tangled together for that individual.

Sexual urges are almost impossibly strong for most healthy young people to suppress. When the sex drive is mixed up with childhood feelings of humiliation and adult experiences of economic oppression it is not a good basis for a caring sexual relationship. When it is the experience daily for human beings to be thrown on the social scrap heap like discarded commodities, it is hard to prevent that attitude from leaking into personal relationships.

Rape, sadism, gratuitous violence and sexual murder are not inexplicable exceptions in an otherwise harmonious society. They are behavioural patterns which are consistent with our war-torn, crime-ridden, ruthless competitive, class-dominated, social system. The pornography of sex and violence is selling so well in films and books and videotapes because the innate violence at the heart of capitalist society permeates every aspect of our lives. It explains us to ourselves in exaggerated terms. It is the mythology of our times.

Ron Cook
Friday, 1 December 1995