

## SHOPPING MALLS AND IMPERIALIST HEGEMONY

by Richard Curtis, M.A.

October 1994

Mailing address:  
Richard Curtis  
P.O. Box 17812  
Boulder, CO 80308-0812

Phone:  
(303) 772-1621

Fax:  
(303) 772-7253

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Americans, like human beings everywhere, believe many things that are obviously untrue.... Their most destructive untruth is that it is very easy for any American to make money. They will not acknowledge how in fact hard money is to come by, and therefore, those who have no money blame and blame and blame themselves. This inward blame has been a treasure for the rich and powerful, who have had to do less for their poor, publicly and privately, than any other ruling class since, say, Napoleonic times.

--Kurt Vonnegut, 1971, p129

### INTRODUCTION

It is a historicist error to claim that bourgeois ideology secures the unity of society, rather bourgeois ideology reflects the unity that exists on deeper [material] levels. (Eagleton, 1991, p122).

In what follows I will examine these related issues. The problem is that the U.S. working class, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, has the least developed class consciousness in its history. Why? There are no doubt many answers. And the answers one finds will most likely have a great deal to do with how the question is phrased. I will accept Eagleton's observation above. Bourgeois ideology does not cause the working class to have an underdeveloped class consciousness, but it certainly does reflect deeper structural levels of class collaboration. I will suggest that this collaboration exists, and is culturally encouraged, in the act of consumption. I will argue that our "cult of consumption" (I will be using the term "shopping mall" symbolically to refer to the cult of consumption) is part of the reason why the working class supports the bourgeois state and economic system as well as the slaughter of peoples who objectively are their allies. I will examine this question of "Shopping Malls and Capitalist Hegemony" in an investigative manner, from history and economics to postmodern politics and commodity aesthetics. I will show that the way in which we live, the structures of our society, encourage class collaboration.

There will also be a number of related issues which, for reasons mostly to do with the scope of this particular project, I will not address in depth. Issues such as racism, which cloud the thinking of much of the proletariat, are obviously important to a full understanding of this problem, but have been examined by more profound thinkers than myself; e.g. W.E.B. DuBois, Herbert Aptheker, and Victor Perlo. I will be focusing on what I consider to be my own unique contribution to an understanding of modern U.S. society. Specifically, I will show that the most powerful piece in the puzzle that is capitalist hegemony is

no longer the church, family, or school, but the shopping mall.

The essence of the argument being made here is that times have changed. Karl Marx described religion as the drug which keeps the working class pacified. Luis Althusser, 100 years later, argued that capitalism had changed the superstructural formations of society, and that among the many mechanisms (Ideological State Apparatus) for securing ideological domination, religion acting in concert with the family had taken a back seat to the schools acting in concert with the family. I will present an argument that even this is no longer true. History has brought us the full superstructural implications of imperialism (or finance capitalism, late capitalism, as you wish, I will use the term imperialism as defined by V.I. Lenin, 1939), and one important result has been that the schools have taken a back seat to the cult of consumption, to the shopping mall.

I will begin this argument with a discussion of the historical development of imperialism in the United States. From there I will discuss the development of postmodernism, I will define the term and show its impact in contemporary U.S. politics. I will then take a brief break to define and discuss the concept of Hegemony as used by Antonio Gramsci. It is in the culture of postmodernism that the role of the commodity and of consumption take on different forms, new forms anticipated by Marx in his detailed analysis of capitalism, which take on a significant role in imperialist hegemony.

In the social organization, the community, which develops out of imperialist culture, the individual nature of postmodern existence and especially in the act of consumption, the shopping mall becomes a new Ideological State Apparatus, in Althusser's terminology. Our new culture, which treats the shopping mall like a temple develops out of the aesthetics of the postmodern commodity. And I will conclude with an analysis of this aesthetic. We begin with the United States in the age of early capitalism.

## IMPERIALISM AND THE "FREE" MARKETPLACE

If we can understand how we became an imperial metropolis in the name of the freedom and prosperity of the country, then perhaps we can free our minds and our wills to achieve freedom and prosperity without being an imperial society. (Williams, 1969, p46).

Something important changes with the advent of imperialism. In Marx's time it was very clear that the workers were exploited; they worked 14 or 18 hour days, made virtually no money, had almost no leisure time, limited access to health care and education, were frequently injured or killed on the job, and when they were finished had nothing to show for it. Clearly, there was a class system at work. Today, clearly there is a class system at work, and all the other things I listed above are still true to some degree. They are all true, except the last one. Today the workers in the belly of the beast (as José Martí put it) can consume, maybe the workers shop at Wal-Mart and the owners at Saks, but some workers shop at Saks too. With an increased productive capacity the need for markets has allowed owners to share a little bit more wealth with some workers in an effort to make them consumers while at the same time finding other forms of control in the former colonies.

Accumulation of capital implies increased exploitation of the workers, including an increased attrition of labour-power, especially through intensification of the production process. But this in turn implies the need for higher consumption just to reproduce labour-power even physiologically. (Mandel, 1977, p69).

Imperialism, following the general laws of capitalism, requires ever expanding production and consumption, requires a consumer society. But how do we get from open warfare between capital and labor in the 1890's to modern suburban shopping malls and secret wars in Peru in the 1990's?

In writing about farm businessmen of the 1860's, William A. Williams claimed (p15), "They [liberal capitalists] had taken his [Adam Smith's] insistence that a free marketplace economy was essential to political and social freedom, and integrated it with the individualistic side of John Locke's philosophy." In Smith and Locke the rising imperialist interests -- which Williams links to farm business in the decades before the U.S. had achieved a level of industrial development to begin exporting those products -- found a rigorous philosophical justification for a policy of non-colonial economic domination. Williams never claimed that this was done explicitly, but that is not the point. It was done, and it was powerful. In fact, the marketplace mentality and related interests actually arose in the 1740's when U.S. farmers began the

systematic export of excess tobacco to England (Williams, p6). With the new significance of British markets came a new consciousness.

Present, too, was the idea of the existence of the United States as vindicating the Age of Reason itself; William Blake, in his poem 'America', saw the Revolution as a mortal blow not only against the tyranny of kings, but against subjugation of all kinds, for he thought it heralded men's making real their 'will for their own freedom'. ... In the success of its federating effort, also, [Richard] Price saw the projection of a universal federation of states, which would herald the achievement of man's noblest aspiration--'universal peace'. (Aptheker, 1976, p21).

But how does one get from free marketplace, or freedom in a more abstract sense, to imperialism? According to Williams (p7) after the "Panic of 1837" the farm business interests intensified pressure on the government to expand international markets and acquire new land at home. By 1895 there was not much more land left to steal, and thus the need to use exports to solve the deepening depression of the 1890's (which many argue was the persistent depression of the 1870's just hanging on) was the only remaining option, short of a radical restructuring of the economy. For the first time, in the elections of 1896, overseas expansion was so widely accepted as the solution to economic problems at home (Kolko, 1976, p41), that both major party candidates openly advocated a policy of imperialism (Williams, p41). In that election McKinley won, "And the president continued to discuss the problem with other men who argued the wisdom of fighting a war against Spain over Cuba, if it proved necessary, in a way that would provide a base for U.S. economic and military power in Asia" (Williams, p45).

The legacy of McKinley accepting those arguments should be clear enough; Nicaraguan Contras are called Freedom Fighters, and so on. Of course, it is also true that ideological appeals to freedom were made throughout the early capitalist period as well. "The continued commitment to that outlook that tied freedom for individual men to the existence of a free marketplace exerted a steadily increasing influence on American foreign policy in the years after independence had been secured" (Williams, p6). For this reason James Polk became the eleventh president in 1845. "Polk was only voicing an outlook and a tradition that reached back into the eighteenth century, but he gave them classic form in his pronouncement that American expansion was justified because it involved 'the expansion of free principles'" (Williams, p8).

What is certain is that before [the First] World War the United States had affected the synthesis of liberal ideology and classic national expansion which was to become the hallmark of United States globalism for the next sixty years [and beyond]. Its internationalism and appeals to higher goals were integral to its expansion of its national economic and strategic interests, and its thin ideological and moral rhetoric was to become a standard handmaiden to justify its more brutal actions to serve itself in Haiti, the Philippines, Cuba, or, later, Vietnam [Grenada, Panama, Iraq, etc.]. (Kolko, p52).

The real life effects of this example of the power of this "moral rhetoric", of imperialist hegemony, on the middle income proletariat (especially) are striking. For example; there is a "Sister City" organization in my home town which has established a tie with Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan. The well intentioned liberal thinking people in the organization have been baffled for years now by the post-Soviet civil war in and around Dushanbe. It seemed so logical to them; a free marketplace economy would naturally bring freedom and happiness to the local population, just as it does here at home. Somehow the connection between our middle American community's relative affluence and its being in the imperialist center does not occur to them. And thus, they cannot figure out what is going wrong. Dushanbe now has access to a relatively free marketplace and is, none-the-less, being destroyed. The key piece of information in understanding this phenomenon is that Dushanbe is not in the imperialist center, but bourgeois ideology blinds them and they cannot make the connection.

This type of blindness is exactly the phenomenon which allows the imperialist class to maintain power. Working people do accept the ideological view of the world presented over and over to them by the ruling class. U.S. military domination really is accepted, by some significant percentage of the population, as necessary to freedom for the victims -- absurd as this may seem in this context. Because the proletariat has accepted the rationalization that a free marketplace means freedom we believe ourselves to be free politically, and will support almost any inane rationalization for sending U.S. children off to kill and die, supposedly to bring our way of life to the world. We have come to believe that if the peasantry in Peru, for example, is to be free it must have access to shopping malls, and we all know that communists are notorious for not providing shopping malls.

The argument, for political purposes, is thus constructed that the U.S. military needs to act to support, maintain, or restore freedom. That this freedom is the freedom of capital is not mentioned, and does not need to be, for the purposes of the imperialist class it is better that it not be mentioned. I have called the acceptance of this "moral rhetoric" class collaboration. Even workers accept that "freedom" must be fought for, and is worth killing and dying. We have reached the point, in this society, where the lack of debate is itself often portrayed as a vindication of democracy, we need only look to the Congressional discussions of the 1991 Gulf War to see this phenomenon in action.

"The mechanisms of parliamentary democracy disguise this antagonism [between workers' and capitalists' interests] and serve to integrate the parties of the nonowners in the power structure of the owners; the history of social democratic parties gives evidence to this" (Holz, 1992, p55). These non-debates -- the form of debate without the function -- presented as the real discussion of principles or ideas has its own name, it is the unique cultural construction called postmodernism -- the cultural logic (superstructure) of imperialism (Jameson, 1992).

## POSTMODERNISM

That which exists and to which people are accustomed is taken as naturally necessary or wanted by the gods or God. Only when conflicts arise do people become conscious of class antagonism. (Holz, p52).

In this discussion I will use the term postmodernism to refer to the culture, or superstructure, that accompanies the structure called imperialism, in the same way that philosophers earlier in the century referred to modernism as the culture of early capitalism. Both terms are used to refer especially to new social relationships which have taken the place of tradition -- traditional religion, ethnic traditions, etc. -- in the cultures of the so-called First World. The English philosopher Mike Featherstone defines five principle characteristics of postmodernism.

1) A blurring of the distinction between art and everyday life, or between high/ serious art and mass/pop art. 2) An aesthetic of sensualism or of the body. 3) An elevation of relativism which leads to antifoundational critique as the only acceptable form of criticism. 4) The fragmentation of time into perpetual presents thereby losing any significant sense of future (possibility) or past (history), reality becomes an image. And, 5) The aesthetization of everyday life which leads to its commodification. (Featherstone, 1991, p123).

"If the ideas of a ruling class were once the dominant ideology of bourgeois society, the advanced capitalist countries today are now a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm" (Jameson, 1992, p17). While Jameson's case is -- in my opinion -- overstated, it is still true that this heterogeneity exists and is the result of the antifoundationalism, the extension of the process of commodification to everything. At one time we had tradition, and history, to tell us what was normal or right. Those things are no longer relevant, and thus the lack of foundation or values.

Capitalism develops a very basic contradiction in value--between use value and exchange value. When things come to be valued only because they can be exchanged all other standards are lost. In postmodern culture we have seen ideas come to be treated as commodities. Without a foundation there is no place from which to judge the truth (truth in the sense of approximating reality) or falsity of an idea-- ideas have come to be valued only for their exchange value, that is, how much people like them. This, I think, is the basis of reactionary complaints against postmodernism. The liberal academy is giving up its



standard texts (texts by dead white men it is true) but has not developed -- and Jameson's analysis suggests cannot develop -- alternative standards from which to more reasonably judge texts or ideas generally. There is great diversity but no standard for quality. In this way the truth value of an idea is analogous to use value, because ideas are only useful in as much as people believe them to, or want them to, approximate reality.

The imperialist capitalist class and their intellectuals have had one very profound effect which contradicts what I said above about diversity. In the postmodernism the concept of class has been virtually eliminated. This may be because workers now consume much like owners (or at least believe in the possibility of this) and thus do not identify themselves, or the owners, as a class. Whatever the cause this diversification has resulted in the loss of class as an analytic category in most current scholarship as well as workers' consciousness. Ironically, truth has become more narrow.

Culture always changes. What people choose to hold on to is a reflection of the world that confronts them. This seems basic, but when the pace of change accelerated in the modern era people suddenly noticed the change as if it was new. In the age of postmodernism the change is becoming a defining characteristic of its own. Some say we are now rootless having completely lost tradition. They say that contemporary culture has destroyed our concept of the sacred, the family, the church, morality, and on and on. But is that really true? Is the sacred gone or just different?

It is true that the key site of the reproduction of bourgeois hegemony is no longer the church or the family. Some ask, then, from whence comes morality without the church? And this may be a valid question, but it assumes the church provided an acceptable morality. Featherstone, whom I have quoted above, agrees that religion has become one more commodity (p113), and that we have lost our standards for morality. But I would argue this is because we have lost our sense of community and human dignity, not the sacred.

Postmodernism justifies domination (Haug, 1986, p77), cruelty (Featherstone, p113), and "blood, torture, death, and terror" (Jameson, p5). Postmodernism is the culture of commodities. All that is important is commodities and the freedom of capital to create them. To this end everything is justified. If the end the system is working towards is the freedom of capital than all things inhuman, cruel and bloody are

justifiable--look at Guatemala or Haiti, and especially at the way these issues are discussed in our government and media.

In postmodernism there is no truth (Jameson, p12), no tradition (Featherstone, p113), no criticism (Haug, p77), there is no reality only images. In our elections it is now assumed that the politician is lying, only saying what her/his constituency wants to hear. And there seems to be no basis from which to challenge this new reality -- everyone does it. This is the situation in which people give up and just go shopping. Think of it, if the world presents a meaningless barrage of images and sound bites bereft of truth, what is left? The working class has accepted, by default, that the only expression left of their humanity is the act of consumption. Only that is real.

Or so it seems....

There is, however, a class content to all culture, to all the laws of motion in class society. The working class experiences the postmodern world as a monstrosity, cold, uncaring, in which only capital has power. This is bourgeois hegemony as a kind of repressive force. I will show, in the next section, that hegemony is not a real force, like gravity is a force. It is a force like the law is a force -- it has power only as long as people believe it to have power. Working class consciousness is believed not to have relevance, or power, and thus does not.

Postmodernism is bourgeois culture, it is the imperialists' class consciousness and it serves their interests. The working class has its own consciousness, but lacking access to the media and means of mass communications is unable to transmit and develop its own consciousness on a wide scale. It is there if people look for it -- but you have to look for it. This is the crux of the problem. And it is not just hidden behind the barrage of banality that is the bourgeois media, the very nature of the working class is changing, forced to become more individualistic. The development and transmission of class consciousness is thus more difficult than before.

The anonymity of developed capitalist relations has disguised class oppositions ... The wealth and power of the stockholders and their representatives in the banks are ... distant and blurred. And the image is further obscured by its treatment in the mass media. Wherever a strong workers' movement has struggled successfully for higher wages and better social security in recent years, wherever the gap

between "middle class" and working class has been reduced and the culture of the working class itself leveled into a general, undifferentiated consumerism, the obvious manifestations of class society have become less visible, easier consciously to grasp in theory than to experience in everyday miseries. (Holz, p68).

In the developed world, successes in gaining higher wages are still at the expense of Third World workers, or the unemployed. And the successes are themselves deceptive, because the working class is easily jettisoned when the economy takes a downturn, this is the experience of the 1990's. The political culture does not yet exist for the working class to unite and demand a more just system. Worse yet, in the 1990's this phenomenon is global.

It used to be that countries would put restrictions on the movement of capital in and out of their borders. This was the old concept of sovereignty. But that concept was based on popular and national interests. All of that has been torn down. Individual nation's interests or their people's interests have been relegated to second place. And why would people allow that to happen? Why define the highest good as the interests of the free movement of capital? Because of the belief that the free marketplace will lead to freedom and prosperity generally -- as Kolko showed (see above). People accept the logic that capital must be allowed complete freedom because it will supposedly lead to prosperity for all. What's good for the market is what's good. This is class collaboration. It is true that what is good for the market is good for capitalists -- because good things in this sense mean growth and capital accumulation. These things have come to be generalized in our culture such that people are expected (by the media especially) to judge their lives by the standard of the success of the market and are told that when the market is free, they will have success (e.g. NAFTA and GATT).

"By selling their labor, by alienating their activity, people daily reproduce the personifications of the dominant forms of activity under capitalism, they reproduce the wage-laborer and the capitalist" (Perlman, 1969, p7). And as long as the system is reproduced it is stable and seems normal. But the workers do not reproduce in themselves the wage-laborer out of choice. "The worker alienates his life in order to preserve his life. If he did not sell his living activity he would not get a wage and could not survive" (Perlman, p9). People work in order to consume, and consume in order to live. Because of

increased exploitation workers need to consume more to maintain their physical existence thus drawing workers deeper into the system and its logic.

The capitalist system does seem to succeed, at some level. It provides for (many) people's needs, and organizes them in constructive (as well as destructive) ways. It does create wealth. And as we can see from the way the peoples of the former Soviet Union gave up all their social security for the pursuit of wealth, the production of wealth (and therefore the freedom of capital) has a powerful hold on people's imagination. "The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an immense collection of commodities; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form," (Marx, 1977, p126). The individual appears to her/himself also as an elementary form, bereft of the ties to custom or tradition which inhibited the freedom of the commodity, of capital, and of the individual in the past.

However, this new cultural form mirrors older ones. We are comfortable discussing the concept of a ruling class historically, because we are so accustomed to it. And there is a great body of thought analyzing the nature of this acceptance of hierarchical domination. Before further discussing the new role of commodities and consumption, I would like to familiarize the reader with the sense in which modern, and postmodern, domination is understood for this argument.

## HEGEMONY

The dominance of a ruling class consists in its being able to achieve a consensus that includes the ruled and exploited people, a consensus based on acceptance of the essential features of its worldview so that it needs to use only limited repression or open force. (Holz, p86).

Antonio Gramsci told us that ideology, bourgeois ideology in particular, is actually a very confused mixture of many different things (Eagleton, 1991, p46). He also believed that western Marxists have tended to overemphasize the role of ideas, that is the role of ideology, in society (Eagleton, p36). Gramsci, instead, focused on "hegemony." Hegemony is a complicated subject, and may, or may not, be simply the effective power of one class to dominate society. I will use the term as such.

Gramsci argues, a class maintains its dominance not simply through a special organization of force, but because it is able to go beyond its narrow corporative interests, exert a moral and intellectual leadership, and make compromises (within certain limits) with a variety of allies who are unified in a social bloc of forces which Gramsci calls the historical bloc. (Sassoon, 1983, p201).

I will be referring to hegemony, then, as the result of the influence of the historical bloc; bourgeois hegemony as the result of the capitalist, or imperialist, historical bloc.

In going deeper into these issues Gramsci claimed that in a historical bloc "...material forces are the content and ideologies are the form" (Gramsci, 1988, p200). He went on to claim that this distinction is for purely analytic purposes, and that in fact, neither could exist without the other. But, this construction is useful. For example, people must work to make money (see Vonnegut above). They are forced to participate in the historical bloc to some degree (as Perlman said, to reproduce their existence), to participate in the system. This needing to work, living in the material conditions of capitalist exploitation (the content) leads naturally enough (because the capitalist class has hegemonic power) to the working class adopting certain ways of thinking, and accepting leadership from the owners (accepting the form that is bourgeois ideology). While this relationship between base (needing to work) and superstructure (bourgeois ideology) may seem simple and obvious, it is in fact a complicated phenomenon existing along side, and interacting with, the working class' own experience and consciousness (to the degree that it is developed). I say along side because it comes from another class' experience but is accepted as universal.

As I understand Gramsci, capitalists are able to rule because they make the system seem natural, constant, and predictable, all while it so consistently reproduces itself. Capitalists have hegemony because working people believe them to have it. Hegemony, while a real political power, is like a myth, something ethereal which is true only because it is accepted as true. Sometimes hegemony breaks down; in the 1930's the system failed and had to be secured using drastic compromises to prevent revolution, in the late 1960's there was massive social unrest because the contradictions became too glaring thus thousands of activists (Black Panther, AIM, Puerto Rican, Weathermen, and Chicano) had to be assassinated, and -- most importantly -- at the turn of the century unions became a real threat so the corporate liberal state had to be established (as William A. Williams argued).

In his "Prison Notebooks" Gramsci claimed that the revolution in his Italy (and our U.S.) requires much more sophisticated methods in order to gain hegemony than were necessary in pre-Soviet Russia (for example, see also Eagleton, p118). I am suggesting that the act of shopping is the most crucial way in which contemporary bourgeois hegemony is maintained in contemporary, that is postmodern, imperialist society. That is, workers participate in the system in a not so obviously victimized way (compared to earlier periods) and thus come to believe in the capitalists' hegemony. Their participation makes the system seem consistent and logical. It delivers the few promises it actually makes. People really do have the freedom to buy "Nike" or "Addidas," or vote for Bill Clinton or George Bush. And this freedom to shop which is to say, freedom to choose (especially as regards consumption) is the new key site of the production and reproduction of capitalist hegemony. This, after all, is the only sphere in which the isolated individual feels some power over his/her situation.

As long as one class has hegemony it will infuse into subordinate classes its values. I maintain that the way in which those values are most strongly infused is through shopping malls. "The individual as consumer, as the carrier of artificially developed needs, is dominated by value notions furnished by the ruling class" (Holz, p74).

Gramsci wrote that hegemony is maintained by civil society, not the state proper. The state is the instrument of coercion, civil society of consent (Eagleton, p114). Civil society consists, according to Gramsci and Althusser, of the usual things; schools, churches, political parties, family, etc. To the top of

this list, in this country at this time, we must add shopping malls. The ideological influence of capital and commodity systems is much greater if the focus of the ideological structure is the very foundation of the system itself -- the commodity. Other ideological apparatus may support the value systems of the imperialists, i.e. the church supporting private property and accepting usuary, but the church and family can only facilitate the transmission of bourgeois ideology, while the commodity system is capitalism.

Working class collaboration is more complicated, of course. All of the other sites of the reproduction of hegemony support each other. Hegemony does not come from one or the other. Althusser was clear that in his time the church had gone from being the most important ideological apparatus to being second to the family and school (Althusser, 1971, p151). It is now more than 20 years since Althusser wrote the essay in question. Perhaps these things vary from nation state to nation state, culture to culture. I cannot say what is true in France. I will say that the shopping mall is the most powerful Ideological State Apparatus in the U.S. today, and probably in France as well. Let me be clear here, I do not mean shopping malls as buildings. What is important is not the physical structure but the consciousness, just as religion is a consciousness supported by the family, the media, etc. Reified consumer consciousness is supported by all the other structures in society. U.S. cultural life revolves around shopping; there are games (Mall Madness), vacations (to the Mall of the Americas), malls are therapy (when people feel bad, or good), babysitters (activities for kids), exercise facilities (mallwalkers), and on and on and on.

In this paper I am arguing that shopping malls are the most influential site for the reproduction of capitalist hegemony. This is true because of a combination of events. This new hegemonic power begins with the decline of the other apparatus; the family was undermined by the capitalist mode of production -- dislocation, flexibility -- the church has splintered into a myriad of confused and confusing subtypes -- just one more array of commodities -- and the schools are in decay from a lack of public support. It is into this changing world that consumerism develops its functionality. The shopping mall's role is so strong because of the very nature of late capitalism -- the expansionist necessities of the imperialist mode of production -- and the culture we call postmodernism reinforces the imperialist definition of freedom (the freedom of movement of capital), in which all other values are relegated to

second place status. Consumption, in the imperialist stage, is the only working class expression of "freedom".



## COMMODITY AESTHETICS

[Economic and political] Impotence is first and foremost that pall on the psyche, the gradual loss of interest in the self and the outside world, very much in formal analogy to Freud's description of mourning; the difference being that one recovers from mourning, but that the condition of non-productivity, since it is an index of an objective situation that does not change, must be dealt with in another way, a way that, acknowledging its persistence and inevitability, disguises, represses, displaces, and sublimates a persistent and fundamental powerlessness. That other way is, of course, consumerism itself, as a compensation for an economic impotence which is also an utter lack of any political power: what is called voter apathy is mainly visible among those strata who lack the means to distract themselves by way of consumption. (Fredric Jameson, p316).

We, as Americans, have actually come to believe that we are exempted from the laws of history because we consume. This powerlessness fits a world situation in which history has "ended." There is nothing left to do, no radical change that needs to be made. We should all just not worry about justice issues and enjoy our consumption.

I do not completely agree with Jameson's estimation of powerlessness as being real, it is believed. But first, Jameson, in this passage, raised an important issue which precedes all the others, and that is reification. Reification is:

The act (or result of the act) of transforming human properties, relations and actions into properties, relations, and actions of man-produced things which have become independent (and which are imagined as originally independent) of man and govern his life. Also transformation of human beings into thing-like beings which do not behave in a human way but according to the laws of the thing-world. Reification is a 'special' case of alienation, its most radical and widespread form characteristic of modern capitalist society. (Petrovic, 1983, p211).

This extreme form of alienation in capitalist society is a result of the process of production, whereby the worker, because of her/his alienation from the means of production, feels alienated from the results of that production and thus feels the commodities produced to be alien from him/her, as well as feeling that co-workers and everybody else is alien. The way in which individuals in this society relate to commodities is a result of this reification. According to Marx (1977), commodities are, organically, an extension of the worker because of the labor power which is encapsulated in them. This connection is disrupted by the capitalist mode of production and results in the phenomenon described by Jameson above -- feelings of economic and the resulting political impotence.

Consumption is the new drug people take to overcome these feelings. Here is one obscure example, others are more obvious; in a recession people lose their jobs, their social standing, and security. As a result the government lowers interest rates. Some portion of the population will be able to take advantage of this inexpensive capital, and will purchase a new home. Owning a home, the American dream, provides security over renting, and allows even the worker to accumulate some capital as the mortgage is paid down. The new owner works on the home, using unalienated labor, improving her/his surroundings; both physical and emotional. It feels good to own one's own home, and to work to make it better. This is the message people receive over and over again in our culture: consumption equals happiness, consumption is the American dream.

"The basic drive of the capitalist mode of production is the drive to accumulate capital" (Mandel, p60). Capitalism needs growth. Without growth there is stagnation. The success of the economy, including its ability to provide security and jobs as well as the accumulation of capital, are all contingent on growth. When this growth slows or stops there is a recession. If the recession is long lasting it is called a depression. This growth (or lack of it depending on the period) is measured in terms of consumption; new housing starts, factory orders, consumer spending, etc. Built into the basic drive of capital accumulation is the need for higher and higher levels of consumption. Workers had to inevitably become consumers (as happens in the transition to imperialism). Becoming consumers does not eliminate exploitation though. As mentioned above, exploitation often increases even while a worker's standard of living is increasing (Marx, 1977, p69).

In imperialist society, the result has been that everything is for sale. Because the capitalist economic system requires expanding consumption to survive, a culture is created where people relate to everything as mere things, as something which can be bought and sold. Everything develops an exchange value, as introduced above. In economic terms, also as mentioned above, there are two kinds of value; exchange value and use value. Given the central place of the market, especially with its resultant reification, exchange value comes to overshadow everything. Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, following Marx, argued that all bourgeois culture comes to be filtered through the market and exchange values (Featherstone, 1991, p14). In practice this is fairly obvious. All culture, artistic events,

sport, and virtually all mediums of information exchange are tainted with consumerism. Were it not for the advertising industry one would have to wonder what culture, radio, TV, movies, sport, etc. would survive in the postmodern U.S.

This all encompassing focus on consumption leads to the situation where the thing is valued for how much it can be exchanged for, not for any quality intrinsic to the thing -- such as it's use. This valuation on form as opposed to function, as we might see the distinction between use and exchange, results in a particular kind of alienated way of relating to things: aesthetics (Featherstone's fifth characteristic of Postmodernism).

The commodification of everything forces a kind of level playing ground on which things can be valued. The place where they are valued is the market, and the way in which they are valued is aesthetics. "Consumers will expend a lot of energy on behalf of the right new image. People actually come in seeking Tiffany boxes in which to wrap other gifts" (Palmer, 1992, p1E). The same cultural logic is behind Bentley selling cars for \$260,000, and the existence of a market in fake Tiffany boxes and fake Rolex watches (Palmer, p4E). Image is aesthetics, it is the elevation of exchange value over use value. The German philosopher Walter Benjamin called it the aesthetization of everyday life (see his "Arcades Project"). According to Benjamin these then new collections of shops all in one place with their atmosphere, lighting, entrances, etc., which the French called arcades, are a kind of temple where the fetish objects of commodities are worshipped. At first these were only for the wealthy, that was the age of classical capitalism. With the advent of imperialism, and the early twentieth century creations of department stores and the advertising industry, the modern shopping mall and consumer culture were born (Featherstone, p113).

This commodification has two specific effects, one personal, and one global. The personal involves the experience of freedom and individuality in the act of consumption. Holz wrote (p70) that because human beings have basic needs; food, clothing, shelter, etc., we are needful beings. However, social needs are not biologically determined they are socially determined. "With clothing styles, furnishings, and even technical equipment, especially automobiles, needs are clearly determined by 'trend setters'" (Holz, p70). And trend setters are trend setters because of the corporate media.

Thirteen year-olds need designer jeans from "The Gap" rather than ordinary jeans from a discount store because of their social system, which is itself a reflection of the larger society. "...the particular wish to consume appears to the individual as an expression of the individual self" (Holz, p70). In fact, "The cunning of the sales pitches based on promises of illusory utility lies in the fact that they address consumers in the appearance of their individual freedom of choice" (Holz, p70). This freedom of choice, of freedom more generally, is the connection to bourgeois ideology. Freedom of choice for the consumer is presented to workers as an extension of the freedom of capital to exploit. On a global level, nations, peoples, and cultures become commodities which should be freely available--at least that is what people come to believe. If the commodities and capital are free to move, to act, then naturally enough people must be free -- right? The free market, embodied in the shopping mall, is seen as the expression of personal freedom. In short, because workers are free to consume they accept the freedom of capital to exploit to be a natural extension. Thus the shopping mall has become the most important Ideological State Apparatus in modern America because that is where people experience what is perceived to be the connection between their lives and the freedom of capital.

## COMMUNITY

Hobbes: This snowman doesn't look very happy.

Calvin: He's not. He knows it's just a matter of time before he melts. The sun ignores his entreaties. He feels his existence is meaningless.

Hobbes: Is it?

Calvin: Nope. He's about to buy a big screen TV. (Watterson, 1994, p45).

Marx's criticism of religion is that it enabled feudalism by making the suffering of the masses seem necessary and rational. We say that ideologies secure unity, discourage opposition. But what is it that would otherwise be opposed? The uneven distribution of wealth and therefore power. The purpose of ideology in the imperialist historic bloc is to rationalize, justify, normalize the status quo, the maldistribution of wealth.

"In fact, the Church has been replaced today in its role as the dominant Ideological State Apparatus by the School. It is coupled with the Family just as the Church was once coupled with the Family" (Althusser, p157). Althusser was arguing that in capitalism religion lost much of its significance, philosophers like Benjamin argued that this was part of the general decline of tradition that came with modernism -- the cultural logic of early capitalism. Capitalism provided much greater levels of wealth in society, and the argument that the masses should suffer for a later heavenly reward faltered. In feudalism excess wealth was visible only in the cathedrals. But with capitalism wealth is much more visible, as is the contradiction between the social nature of production and its unjust distribution. Thus Althusser's observation that the unity needed to maintain the historic bloc was secured in other ways; the schools taught students the social order, families modeled the acceptance of this order.

In this paper I have argued that the family and schools no longer have this kind of impact, but that our means of consumption now secures the ideological unity. We are no longer "homoreligioso," we are "homoconsumptuous." To return to Marx's critique, religion defines human existence in terms of the social order needed by feudalism. Survival and reproducing that survival were necessary because of "God's plan." In early capitalism it was possible to believe that one's labor would eventually provide for a comfortable living for one's progeny if not one's self. The social nature of existence and thus its meaning are expressed in the dream that capitalism would live up to the promises made by the capitalists -- in the persons of Smith, Hobbes, and Locke.

In the age of imperialism even this dream has faded and no longer offers meaning. The masses in America are told that this is what we get -- we have won the Cold War and this is the end of history. The social ills that remain are thus supposed, propagandized, to be the "inherent" problems of humanity. In the ages past we have supposed that these are the problems related to the fallen nature of humanity, from the Garden of Eden story. Today they are the result of sub-standard parenting and the lack of "Family Values." Or we are told that the poor deserve it because they are stupid, unlucky, or inferior. At the end of history all we have is our present lives, our careers, vacations, family responsibilities -- all we have is our money and bobbles to spend it on.

The hegemonic power of the Shopping Mall is that it implies a definition of human existence that's only meaning is found in our ability to consume -- this is the individualistic culture of postmodernism. Shopping malls are literally like temples because they are the place where homoconsumptuous goes to reaffirm its existence. The popular reflection is: We are not going to get a more even distribution of wealth so we might as well settle in with what we got, and maybe try to get a little more.

In the "Grundrisse" Marx wrote, "In this society of free competition, the individual appears detached from the natural bonds etc. which in earlier historical periods make him the accessory of a definite and limited human conglomerate" (Marx, 1978, p222). It is the religious community that formed one type of conglomerate, and the family and schools which formed another. But in the postmodern world we have only the individual. Today, we are all alone -- that is unless we are actively working in a community for some type of change. The isolated individual is thus more susceptible to the propaganda, ideological reinforcement, of bourgeois society. And this is true because we are literally alone, the imperialist world has uprooted the whole of society. The reader is no doubt familiar with popular laments of this condition -- families spread across the nation or globe, as well as all the other things the "Family Values" lobby complains about without any understand of how or why the phenomenon occurs.

## CONCLUSION

For the philosophy of praxis [aka Marxism], ideologies are anything but arbitrary; they are real historical facts which must be combatted and their nature as instruments of domination revealed, not for reasons of morality etc., but for reasons of political struggle: in order to make the governed intellectually independent of the governing, in order to destroy one hegemony and create another, as a necessary moment in the revolutionizing of praxis. (Gramsci, p196).

There is a line from the movie "Jesus Christ Superstar," in which Jesus says to Judas that there will be poor -- always. Certainly this has always been the message of the churches, of religion. Sure there is injustice, but that is because humans have fallen from grace. We can deal with this injustice better or worse, but we can't eliminate it. This is how these people think.

It is true that the social significance of this line of thinking has declined since the beginning of the "modern" period, that is with the beginning of capitalism. This decline in the influence of religion has increased with the "postmodern" period, with imperialism, but has not disappeared. The modern version comes from Freud and his ilk, that there will always be suffering because people are inherently corrupt -- id driven in Freud's terms. The postmodern version is that there is nothing we can do about it because the world is too complicated.

It is my belief that this ideological construction of the world being too complicated has taken a real hold of people with the end of the Cold War, because history has "vindicated" capitalism. Obviously then any problems which remain at the end of history are the ones we have to live with. We see this especially in recent discussions of the economy in the mainstream media. We are told that we are in a recovery, yet all of the signs of depression continue to increase. Rep. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt) calls this the Pauperization of America. Objectively, class contradictions have intensified -- the rich are richer, the poor are ever poorer.

Marx condemned the religion of his time because it rationalized human suffering, integrated it into the worldview of the time, and promised people that if they behaved they would be rewarded at some later date. This is the defining characteristic of feudal religion and into early capitalism.

Luis Althusser argued that fully developed capitalism has undermined the foundations of the

religious worldview and thus its ideological effect is lessened. Althusser thought that its role had been taken over by the family structure and schools. Children had to learn their place, somewhere. Schools and families accepted the social hierarchies of capitalist society. They may have relied on the old religious rationalizations from time to time, but they augmented them with others -- racism especially. But with imperialism, the age of finance capital, we have something different.

These days capitalism has not only undermined religion, but it has decimated the family and more and more the schools. We are alone. Mercantile society still had the community as defined by religions. Early capitalism had the community as defined by the nuclear family. Late capitalism offers us freedom in the ultimate sense of having no community -- no obligations, no commitments, no ties to the land or geography, to the people or culture, all is for sale and we can take it or leave it.

The working class participates in the system, especially through consumption. This participation leads to the acceptance of bourgeois hegemony and its rationalizations. These ideological constructions support a particular worldview which includes the necessity of imperialism, without actually calling it that. Lacking the critical tools or ethical grounding to challenge the bourgeois ideological construction of the world, it is accepted and the working class more or less supports, as necessary, violence at home and abroad. The rise of a social cult of consumption, embodied in the shopping mall, a cult whose very object is the foundation of capitalism -- the commodity -- results in the establishment of a much more powerful ideological apparatus (than in previous social orders) and a much more powerful form of bourgeois hegemony.

But what can be done about this? It depends on who you ask. I don't know what to do exactly. I do believe it is important to understand these phenomena, and disseminate that information. Many people have the intrinsic sense that shopping malls are a destructive presence in our culture, we might here recall the successful campaign to keep a Wal-Mart out of Greenfield, Massachusetts (AP Wire, 1993, p5). But why it is true is the more important question. I hope to have provided one possible answer to that question. The working class and its organic intellectuals must seek to understand and fully develop a critical theory of late capitalism and its means of hegemony. "Without a theory as a critique of the present and a design for the future, the masses remain divided and their weapons blunt" (Holz, p51).



It is true that the potential subject of the class struggle is the class of wage laborers as a whole, but the real subject is the organized community of the politically active, the party of class conscious workers. Its task is to develop class consciousness and inject it into the working class, to manifest the theoretical principles and perspectives of the class struggle, and to prepare and carry out the actions required by the class struggle. (Holz, p74).

As a final word of caution I would like to condition all that I have written above, it is tied to a particular time in history. I do believe that I have introduced a new concept, a new analysis which may help arm the working class. However, everything superstructural is changeable. Culture changes with the means of production, means of survival. In the age of imperialism we have assumed a certain standard of living which is in part necessary as regards the market needs of capital. Imperialism will provide with higher levels of consumption, but when the economy does not perform, consumption -- especially for the working class -- declines. As I noted above, the working class is always seen as expendable. In the 1990's we have depression and new freedoms for the movement and exploitative power of capital. The higher levels of consumption present at the time of this writing are not guaranteed. The postmodern may well in that sense [of the new freedom of movement and power of multinational capital] be little more than a transitional period between two stages of capitalism, in which the earlier forms of the economic are in the process of being restructured on a global scale, including the older forms of labor and its traditional organizational institutions and concepts. That a new international proletariat (taking forms we cannot yet imagine) will reemerge from the convulsive upheaval it needs no prophet to predict: we ourselves are still in the trough, however, and no one can say how long we will stay there. (Jameson, p417).

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