

LECTURE 06: Mass Consumption and Open Source Dissent

In my last lecture I spoke about ‘lifestyles’ and about how the concept and practice of lifestyle was specific to highly developed types of capitalist economy in which individual wage labour and high levels of personal consumption can be said to exist.

I argued that because capitalism has driven all other kinds of society – communal hunting and gathering, chattel slavery and other forms of servile labour, feudalism and state communism – either to extinction – or radically to the margins of human social existence, that the capitalist order *has no outside*. For those living in capitalist society there is *no outside* – there is nowhere (*except in the imagination*) to exist outside or *beyond* relations largely determined by the profit motive and generalised commodity production.

[co-operatives – collective enterprises]

[public sector services – town halls, schools, health services, NGOs –
voluntary sector more generally]

Consequently, those opposed to the system are led inevitably to construct anti-capitalist lifestyles composed in a manner similar to the rest of the population; anti-capitalists, like everybody else have to construct a lifestyle from particular kinds of purchases, particular kinds of consumption, and particular kinds of social practice, consonant with the choice of particular goods and services.

- preference for spontaneity
- preference for informality
- preference for the thrown-together in contrast to the pre-packaged or shrink-wrapped – *in contrast to the fiercely or frankly commercial styles* chosen by those untroubled by the nature of the system

However, despite these preferences the danger of absorption or recuperation always exists where the advertising and marketing people, shopkeepers and merchants of all kinds, will simply absorb a taste for fedayeen scarves, Che t-shirts, dreadlocks, vegetarianism or a hatred of fur coats. Consequently, capitalism appears to be able to absorb an extraordinary range of ‘counter-cultural’ influences without difficulty.

What is more the fashion industry and marketing organisations appear to be extraordinarily swift in absorbing new fashions and new habits in a way that makes it difficult to determine whether we are confronted by a popular street fashion, or simply by something promoted by edgy designers, or by the desire to emulate the dress sense of rock stars or footballers. It is often extremely difficult to trace the origin of these fashions and habits of dress.

- perpetually falling-down jeans [anti-fit]

So, it is often difficult to determine where this stuff comes from. And the concept of ‘recuperation’ canvassed by the Situationists [Recuperation – a concept that I will be talking about in Lecture 7 – so make sure that you read *The Society of the Spectacle* –] is not really up to the job of expressing fully what is happening.

Clearly, we are confronted by a much more dynamic set of processes and practices in which oppositions *live together – perhaps feeding off each other* – and in the process actually forming and reforming each other. We *do not* appear to live in a society where opposition is simply crushed or simply absorbed, or for that matter, in a society in which radical gestures or fashions or modes of organisation are *simply* reinscribed with pro-capitalist *or* reactionary content.

Something else seems to be going on – a process much more akin to *symbiosis* in which capitalists and anti-capitalists are in some sense partners – living together and radically influencing each other. The secondary dictionary meaning of *symbiosis* is an interaction between two *dissimilar* organisms living in close physical association – especially one in which one benefits the other.

[Socialism]

[Capitalism]

It may be that in using the term symbiosis to describe the relationship between anti-capitalist movements and the forces which they are ranged against that I am overstating the interpenetration or mutual dependency at work here – however – I think that it is worth considering the dynamic relationship between capitalism and its opponents in relation to Identity Politics, Diversity, Free Association, Co-operation, Non-Hierarchical forms of leadership, and the tension between the Centre and the Local.

All these issues arise in the texts that I asked you to read particularly in Naomi Klein, and in the essay by Richard Stallman, ‘Copyleft: Pragmatic Idealism’.¹ Klein is particularly concerned with the fate of identity politics and the manner in which she thinks the radical focus upon identity during the late eighties and early nineties resulted in a situation in which radicals were distracted from class politics and economic struggles by concerns over representations of blacks, gays and women in the media.

In raising this concern Klein is noticing the degree to which capitalism appears to have come to terms with issues which earlier generations (her own and mine in particular) regarded as intrinsically revolutionary.

¹ Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, London: Flamingo, 2000, 2001, 2002 (particularly Chapter 5); Richard Stallman, ‘Copyleft: Pragmatic Idealism’, Free Software Foundation, Boston MA, <http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/pragmatic.html>; see also, Annalee Newitz, ‘Peace, Love, Linux: When the Open Source Movement Got in Bed with Capitalism’, in Joel Schalit, ed., *The Anti-Capitalist Reader: Imagining a Geography of Opposition*, New York: Akashic Books, 2002.

[People used to think that Gay Rights, Feminism, and Black emancipation were intrinsically revolutionary – i.e. that they were raising demands that could *not ever* be met or granted by capitalist society.]

And, it is indeed astonishing to anybody born before, say, 1965, to witness the way in which most advanced capitalist societies have responded to the struggle for racial and gender equality and to the struggles of homosexuals for equal rights.

Earlier generations of radicals and anti-capitalists simply did not believe that bourgeois society was capable of making the sort of changes that it has made over the last fifteen or twenty years.

This has meant, not simply that we now have widespread homoerotic images mobilised for the sale of everything from perfume to city-centre apartments, but it has meant that people who were formerly despised, whose relationships were at best semi-legal and at worst entirely illegal, are now able in the metropolitan centres to live and work with much greater openness and freedom than was formerly the case. There have been similar developments in relation to the position of women and of black and Asian people throughout the West.

It continues to be true also that homosexuals are routinely beaten up and occasionally beaten to death. And, it is certainly the case that many people of African or Asian descent continue to suffer disproportionately from unemployment, poor housing, and state violence. Women continue, by and large, to get lower pay, to suffer the consequences of poor or non-existent childcare facilities, and are disproportionately edged into low paid work.

[France – Sarkozy echoing Le Pen in announcing the deportation/expulsion of rioters from France – we must remember that those born to foreign-born parents in France are *not* French citizens until they reach the age of majority at 18]²

[Romanian Gypsies]

However, despite these continuing structural difficulties the nature and extent of the social oppression of women, black people, and homosexuals *has not remained the same*. Market-oriented ‘neo-liberal’ Capitalism has not *simply* incorporated positive images of independent women, cool black people, and elegant gay men – capitalism has not *simply* marketed images – it has positively accommodated *real* structural changes in which *real* improvements in the life chances of millions of oppressed people have occurred.

Of course it remains to be seen what, if any, the limits are to these developments, but it does seem to be the case that advanced capitalist economies – particularly those

² Other citizenship rights apply to some children who meet specific sets of conditions.

guided by more free-market, 'neo-liberal' arrangements – are capable of accommodating considerable degrees of diversity in family arrangements, sexual arrangements, ethnic identification, and cultural and religious practice.

The celebration of diversity marketed by Nike, Coca-Cola, Benetton, the Gap and many others, refers to actual relationships in the more liberal market economies. To be sure, big corporations celebrate this diversity in an idealised and glamorous way, but it remains true in the great cities and metropolitan areas of wealthy capitalist countries that social, economic, and cultural life, is indeed marked by an unparalleled degree of racial, ethnic, familial, and sexual diversity. The adverts and promotions – what Klein refers to as 'diversity marketing' – have apparently resulted in what Vandana Shiva has called 'the monoculture' and Klein calls 'mono-multiculturalism'.³

Now without going into a thorough analysis of this phenomenon it is clear that this diversity *is not something invented by advertisers and marketing organisations* – on the contrary they are, in order to sell their products and realise profits, responding to real phenomena: new levels of diversity brought about by very large and very rapid migrations and by substantial changes in the way in which both industry and commerce is conducted in the rich economies.

So, it has turned out that those 'identity politics radicals' who wanted many more positive images of people who were formally despised and marginalized, and who continue in many respects to be oppressed have, through what might be called a symbiotic relationship with capital, achieved many more positive images – images which do actually reflect, enlarge, and exaggerate, some of the real improvements which have taken place in the situation of women, ethnic minorities, and homosexuals.

White, straight, male-dominated hierarchical organisations have had to give way *on the left*, no less than on the right or in business circles, to the demands of women and of minorities. Both the radical left and the capitalists have engaged in this process whereby the forces of capitalist development and of anti-capitalism have *both* had to move towards an accommodation with diversity.

We Must Remember the history of the:

[gay question on the left]

[black question on the left]

[All left wing organizations of any weight or size used to be run by (*ostensibly*) straight white middle class men]

So, it has not been simply a case of the left demanding reform on matters of social oppression – left wing organisations – trade unions and parties – have all had to undergo difficult reform of themselves on these issues at the same time as specifically

³ Klein, *No Logo*, p117.

oppressed people fought with agencies within the state and the private sector. Through the sixties, seventies, and eighties, the battle was always fought (by specifically oppressed people) on two fronts – against backward elements on the left and against reaction on the right.

Similar *sympiotic* developments have taken place in cashless economic transactions where capitalists have had to accommodate to radical ideas concerning co-operation, spontaneity, localism versus centralisation, and the provision of free services. And the principal arena for these developments has been the Internet (and from the early nineties, the World Wide Web).

As you are no doubt aware the programme to establish the Internet was initiated in October 1962 at the United States' Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). The purpose of this research programme was to establish a communications network that would continue to function even if some of its nodes were knocked out of action by an enemy or any other cause. What was envisaged was a set of computers distributed across the globe connected to each other in such a way that everyone could access data and programs from any of the computers on the network.

The pilot network came into existence in 1969 linking four American research teams and this had by 1973 grown into 'Internetting', complete with Transmission Control Protocol and Internet Protocol.

These developments from the heart of the 'military industrial complex' and the subsequent development of hypertext, the personal computer, and later of HTML, upon which the World Wide Web is based, made new forms of co-operation between competing capitalist companies absolutely essential, and radically widened the scope of 'the free economy of the Internet'.⁴

Consequently, the Internet and the World Wide Web, is the product of the most diverse groups and forces, the US military authorities, the state-financed scientific establishment in the USA and Western Europe, telecommunications companies, information management scientists funded by a variety of different agencies, private industry and commerce, and the work of thousands of people engaged in the open source movement.

Information technology in the organisation of capitalist enterprises has also created the paradoxical situation in which capitalists can greatly centralise information and use this new and timely information to run radically decentralised organisations in which the timing and inflection of as many decisions as possible are deferred to local managers and local front-line staff. This has resulted in a great many important social changes in the way in which business hierarchies are conceived and organised.

⁴ Rishab Aiyer Ghosh, *Cooking pot markets*, 1999.

[teams, first names, ‘owning the job’]

In its nature the Web is a radically distributed network of networks it is not subject to central control or direction.

[‘The allocation of domain names has never been the subject of political or economic dispute’ – Note moves to undermine this state of affairs by the attempt of various governments to intervene in the allocation of domain names.] [See Domaincop.com]

And, most of the information and services on the Internet are, like basic email and many other services, provided free of charge.

The writing, maintenance, and distribution of free (open source) operating systems and free (open source) browsers lay at the heart of the development of the public access Internet (during the eighties) and of the World Wide Web (during the nineties).

Within a radically distributed network of networks it was not possible to prevent the development of a whole range of not-for-profit information services or the development of freely offered intellectual property. Of course the American state could, at any stage in the development of the Internet, have ‘pulled the plug’ – cut off funding – or have crushed Internet autonomy by the manipulation of telecommunications law and regulation within the United States. It chose not to do so. On the contrary it used telecommunications policy to deregulate and free-up participation.⁵

Consequently, the radical free-wheeling ‘geeks’ and net enthusiasts were freely operating within a system brought to them by the ‘military-industrial complex’. This was the environment in which the Free Software Foundation (with their general public licence) mounted their radical attack upon the principles of copyright.⁶

- You have the freedom to run the program, for any purpose.
- You have the freedom to modify the program to suit your needs. (To make this freedom effective in practice, you must have access to the source code, since making changes in a program without having the source code is exceedingly difficult.)
- You have the freedom to redistribute copies, either gratis or for a fee.
- You have the freedom to distribute modified versions of the program, so that the community can benefit from your improvements.⁷

⁵ Dan Schiller, *Digital Capitalism: Networking the Global Market System*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2000, pp1-88.

⁶ <http://www.gnu.org/> accessed 09/11/05

⁷ Richard Stallman, <http://www.gnu.org/gnu/thegnuproject.html>, accessed 09/11/05.

Despite a situation in which vastly wealthy companies like Microsoft, Time Warner AOL, Google, Amazon and many others, a plethora of free software and services continue to be provided and exchanged on the Internet. Furthermore, many competing companies are compelled to share information, to co-operate with each other in the development of standards and services in which their competitive collision would be disadvantageous to either company.

The symbiotic relationship in which military, industrial, commercial, and open source software writers, have co-operated to produce a radically distributed network has indeed created the very conditions in which the modern anti-capitalist movement is dependant for its existence. Indeed the range and level of activity of modern anti-capitalist movements is inconceivable without free email and virtually free postings on sites maintained by around 200 Independent Media Centres across the world. There are also spin-offs into radio; video, and print creating a vast independent publishing network controlled neither by capitalist interests nor those of specific left-wing parties or groupuscule. Anyone can contribute.

In fact the wiki principle has come to dominate. Wiki is a piece of server software that allows users to freely create and edit Web page content using any Web browser. Wiki supports hyperlinks and allows users to create new pages and establish crosslinks between internal pages.⁸ It allows any visitor to directly add and edit material on the site.

Never before has such a device existed in which any member of the public may contribute to public discussion. This fact alone makes the modern anti-capitalist movements unique in the history of the socialist and anarchist movement. Anybody can literally have their say and mobilise other like-minded people around issues that they deem to be priorities.

Inevitably, Wikipedia and other open access modes of publishing will expand in a similar manner to the development of blogs and blogging, which unlike wiki contributions, do have modest costs attached.

These developments have radically altered the role of centralisation in much capitalist enterprise and largely undermined the way in which radical or revolutionary leaderships could in the past seek to direct all the affairs of their parties and movements from the centre.

The possibility of large well-organised groups who are able to operate without reference to democratic-centralist or ordinary liberal-hierarchical political organisations has given the modern anti-capitalist movements an entirely different social and intellectual texture from earlier movements organised against capital in

⁸ <http://wiki.org/wiki.cgi?WhatIsWiki> accessed 09/11/05

which the discipline of the workplace organisation (trade union) or that imposed by the political party was paramount.

This in itself has given rise to different conceptions of radically distributed leadership in which the function of leadership is seen to be distributed across a large number of forums and personalities and is not thought to automatically reside within a particular individual or within a particular group of 'representative individuals'.

To be sure, this creates a problem for democratic decision-making. If nobody is prepared to rest final authority within any particular forum or body of representatives, democratic, or perhaps 'majoritarian' decision-making, becomes impossible. The sovereignty of individual forums, individuals, activity groups or affinity groups can *and is* insisted upon. Consequently, only the most diffuse and vague kind of unity can be established because anything firmer would simply result in all groups going off and doing their own thing or in the worst case, in disintegration.

So, here in the heart of the anti-capitalist movement, largely because of the self-organisation facilitated by the Internet, the mobile phone, and cheap civil aviation, symbiotic relationships exist between liberals and revolutionaries, between anarchists and Leninists, between observant Muslims and lesbian and gay activists. This diversity is in fact a reflection of the wider relations in capitalist society in which people of all sorts are required to meet and work together in the radically distributed networks that are becoming a defining feature of modern capitalist relations.