

“Capitalism is boring!”

“Those who speak of revolution without reference to everyday life have a corpse in the mouth!”

Or, the problem of “pacification by cappuccino” (Sharon Zukin)¹

LECTURE 07:

Still Bored and Desperate: Sterility and Recuperation

For the last week or so I have been developing the idea that capitalism is now a system without an outside; an all-embracing system in which we are all ensnared within a matrix composed of generalised commodity production and the profit motive. Consequently, the lesson that I’ve been drawing from this is that resistance of any sort is profoundly difficult – difficult, but not impossible.

However, resistance to the system is made difficult not by the scale of the pro-capitalist forces, their wealth, their size, or their strength, but by the difficulty of postulating an alternative trajectory or route for social development.

[This is what makes it very difficult to build lasting support among large sections of the population – Because we have no *plausible* alternative – most people simply shy away from commitment to change.]

¹ See also David Harvey, ‘The Capitalist City’ or the ‘Right to the City’, *New Left Review*, 53 September/October 2008, pp.23-40.

It is easy enough to protest the execution of Buddhist monks in China or Burma, to fight against the use of phosphorous shells or depleted uranium ordinance in Iraq, to campaign against first world farm subsidies, but it is a great deal more difficult to win support for the battle against capitalism *in general* in the absence of any *systemic* alternative.

Matters are further compounded as we discussed last week by the dynamic capacity of the system to absorb and incorporate what were often thought of as oppositional or intrinsically radical ideas. This process has been particularly important in relation to the specific forms of oppression experienced by women, homosexuals, and by black and ethnic minority populations in the wealthier capitalist countries. Indeed over the last thirty or forty years it has become increasingly obvious that capitalism can function perfectly well without institutionalising the historic oppressions associated with patriarchy, with sexism and with racism. And, in recent years, this has even included the removal of many of the barriers to full social participation experienced by people with specific disabilities.

[Ramps, lifts, accessible toilets, etc.]

Now, without taking anything away from the historic struggles waged by oppressed people for their rights – which have indeed been going on for a very long time – it is the case that governments, legal systems, public social arrangements, and informal social attitudes, have begun to shift against a whole raft of oppressive ideas in which specific groups of people are structurally disadvantaged and discriminated against.

This, in turn, has been taken up by advertisers and by marketing people in order to celebrate and market diversity itself – so much so that corporate interests are engaged in what Naomi Klein has called the marketing of diversity or of mono multi-culturalism.²

And it probably does mean that capitalism doesn't really need to strengthen or perpetuate these historic oppressions. It can get along fine with highly educated, self-defining, women managers and executives; it can cope only too well with openly male gay households who have fairly large disposable incomes (*two full wages and no kids*), and with a small but growing black middle class, and a burgeoning South and East Asian class of professionals and business people. In fact, the people who represent and administer the system have in recent years been extremely active in removing as many of the barriers to full participation by these sections of the population as they have felt able to do.

[Where this is about resources – childcare or disability rights – they have moved more cautiously – however the authorities have done a great deal to get the public on-side – to win support for more liberal social policies.] [USA & Europe – different experiences]

While broadly welcoming these changes people on the left have, of course, dwelt upon their *partial* and *limited* character, and have been even sharper in their assertion

² Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, London: Flamingo, 2000, 2001, 2002, p117.

that the profit system cannot provide a good (or even an acceptable life) for the majority of the population. And, of course, this kind of argument is particularly powerful in relation to world poverty and the many hundreds of millions of people who lack basic food, water, sewerage, housing, and clothing.

[Historically: The thesis of immiseration]

However, in the wealthier countries where maybe two-thirds of the population are well-to-do or basically comfortable and the vast majority of the remaining third are adequately (if poorly) fed, clothed and housed, sustaining a critique of capitalism centred upon poverty and basic material needs is very difficult indeed. 'Raw poverty' doesn't describe most people's circumstances. The *mean* and *narrow* life on offer to those socially excluded by their lack of skills or education, or by ill health, or by some other misfortune, is not fully captured by arguments about 'raw poverty' either.

[Unemployment]

[*Socialist Worker* – estate management and central heating or double glazing]

Despite the manifest shortages of child care or good affordable housing it is clear that an effective critique of capitalism within the rich countries must deal with problems of culture, with problems of banalisation, with the sense of triviality and unreality which many people experience at the heart of everyday life, with problems associated with the so-called 'commodification' of sexuality and of personal relations more broadly.

[The mind numbing triviality of much popular media and the meretricious success of many celebrities are cases in point.] [*The X Factor*]

As many anti-capitalists would argue there is a hole at the heart of life under capitalism through which people's spiritual needs, their creativity, their propensity for love, and their capacity for solidarity, tends to drain away. Despite, the extraordinary ability of the system to meet basic material needs it is often argued that capitalism, in the process of securing good basic living standards in food, clothing and housing, actually crushes our creativity and condemns us to a life of illusion.

This was the standpoint of the Situationists who during the course of the nineteen fifties and sixties in France developed a range of responses to what they came to call the 'society of the spectacle', some of which included a new focus upon play and playfulness, to the eroticising of everyday life, to creativity, and to what came to be called psycho-geography.³

The Situationists were responding to the exhaustion of avant-garde movements in the arts – Futurism, Dada, the Bauhaus, and Surrealism – and directly in the field of politics to utopian socialism, state communism – to what they called “the confused reign of retrograde imbecility”⁴ in the Soviet Union and China – and to anarchism.

³ Daniel Weston, 2008, 'The political inception of psychogeography: Iain Sinclair's Downriver (1991)', at <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/landscape/assets/Daniel%20Weston%20-%20The%20political%20inception%20of%20psychogeography.pdf>

⁴ Guy Debord, 'Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action', 1957, in Ken Knabb, ed., *Situationist International: Anthology*, Berkeley, Cal: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981, p.21.

They were responding to what they regarded as the exhaustion and failure of all of these radical trends.

[From 1910 to the catastrophes of the 1930s and 1940s]

I asked you to read *The Society of the Spectacle* and to have a look at *Basic Banalities: A brief history of the Situationist International*. I'm well aware that *The Society of the Spectacle* is an extremely difficult text saturated as it is with allusions to Marxism and Marxist theory, to the history of the socialist and anarchist movement, to High Modernism, and to psychoanalysis – however, I trust that you were all able to have a look at some bits of the text and to begin at least to piece together the kind of approach being taken by Guy Debord and his comrades.

[Use the links on the website.]

The kind of analysis promoted by the Situationists has particular contemporary relevance when one thinks of the kind of modern analysis which focuses upon logos and advertising and images, and the modes of anti-capitalist resistance which focus upon events which attempt to remake and reclaim public spaces by a variety of different kinds of action from guerrilla gardening to mass bicycling or impromptu street parties and demonstrations which aim at the disruption of the flow of 'ordinary commercial life'.

The first paragraph of *Society of the Spectacle* describes capitalism as “an immense accumulation of *spectacles*.” Reality has been subsumed by its representation; the

image is more highly valued than that of which it is a representation. So, the image has overtaken real life in such a fundamental way that the reality of the image has taken precedence over the reality of the thing being represented. Life under capitalism is life in a 'hall of mirrors' where only the reflections of reality are compared, exchanged.

Paragraph 1: reads:

“In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.”⁵

This phrase in the first paragraph of the *Society of the Spectacle*, “an immense accumulation of *spectacles*” is analogous to a phrase used by Karl Marx in the first paragraph of *Capital*, which reads:

The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as “an immense accumulation of commodities,” its unit being a single commodity. Our investigation must therefore begin with the analysis of a commodity.⁶

The interest in this analogy between the *commodity* upon which Marx focused all attention and the *spectacle* upon which Debord focuses is that both are based upon a *critical assumption* upon which their analysis rests but which is not the subject of their respective theories. For this reason this *critical assumption* may be thought of as the ‘negative point’ within each theory.

⁵ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Detroit: Black & Red, 1983 (1967), Chapter 1, Paragraph 1.

⁶ In this passage from *Capital* Marx quotes himself. The phrase “an immense accumulation of commodities” is borrowed from Karl Marx, *Zur Kritik der Politischen Oekonomie*, Berlin, 1859, p.3. See also Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume 1, (1867) translated 1887, London: Lawrence & Wishart, p.43; *Footnote 1*, p.43, 1983.

For Marx the *critical assumption* upon which his theory of the commodity rests but which is not really ever the subject of detailed consideration – the negative point so to speak – is the ‘use value’ of the commodity. Marx does not investigate use-values he assumes that commodities must have them, but does not investigate what might be meant by use-value – he knows what he means and he assumes that we will know what he means – consequently, he focuses all his attention upon exchange-value and surplus value.

In a similar manner Guy Debord’s focus is upon describing capitalism as an “immense accumulation of *spectacles*.” The *critical assumption* here upon which his theory of the *society of the spectacle* rests but which is not really ever the subject of detailed consideration – the negative point so to speak – is the ‘real’ or ‘everyday life’ which is subsumed by the spectacular nature of modern capitalist relations. Debord does not investigate ‘real’ or ‘everyday life’ he assumes that there is or could be such a thing, but does not investigate what might be meant by real everyday life – he knows what he means and he assumes that we will know what he means – consequently, he focuses all his attention upon the way in which real life is subsumed by the spectacular.

By employing this *critical assumption* that modern capitalist relations are organised around the production of spectacles in which the image is detached from life and becomes more important than life – real everyday life – the Situationists canvassed the view that there is something called ‘real everyday life’ which can be counter posed to the illusory spectacular goals and productions of the system.

Indeed, this 'real life' is *colonised* or taken over or *subsumed* by the spectacle:

Lived reality is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle while simultaneously absorbing the spectacular order, giving it positive cohesiveness.⁷

[Virgin – young men in club – the mobilisation of nostalgia]

Just as we have been talking about the manner in which capitalism appears to be able to recuperate the ideas and criticisms of its opponents by marketing the 'revolutionary', by marketing 'liberation', by marketing 'diversity', the Situationists believed that in the society of the spectacle what might be deemed as 'reality' by its opponents is actually absorbed or reshaped by spectacular forces which in turn rob it of its real life.

One need only think of the manner in which Bob Geldof, ably assisted by the churches, leading politicians, and leading figures in the large NGOs, was able to 'Make Poverty History' a unifying slogan; a slogan robbed of its radical or revolutionary content, to glimpse the way in which this dynamic of absorption might be said to function.

So, the Situationists were concerned about the way in which revolutionary politics, trade union struggles, even anarchism, has been (or is being) subsumed by the spectacular nature of the society in which we live – the way in which all revolutionary challenge runs the risk of being taken over or directed along paths which can only

⁷ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Chapter 1, Paragraph 8.

strengthen the society of the spectacle – forms of action which can only confirm that we are ‘caught’ in ‘the historical movement’ of the spectacle.⁸

This bleak analysis, which could tend towards modes of despair in which all resistance might be deemed useless, was in fact supported by a profoundly utopian impulse. But it was a utopianism of a profoundly modern type. They did not attempt to repeat the old aspirations for community in essentially rural or self-contained communities promoted by nineteenth century utopian socialists.

On the contrary, their utopianism was a utopianism of desire supported by a process of imagining the modern city in an entirely new way – a way in which architecture and creativity were mobilised for the realisation of a mode of life in which life could be lived without being organised or subsumed by the illusory promise of the spectacular.

[Alienation – the society of the spectacle is a society characterised by alienation from our real lives.]

It is indeed difficult to get a handle upon what is precisely meant by the project of psycho-geography or by the idea of a model Situationist city. But evidently what the Situationists were attempting was to imagine what it would mean to escape from circumstances in which ‘real life’ is being absorbed by its image.

⁸ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Chapter 1, Paragraph 11.

What they wanted to do was to imagine such a future as a thoroughly urban idea in which the technic deployed by the Bauhaus, implied by the modern city, by the machine age, would be subverted – a situation in which the utilitarian and the industrial would be subverted by the introduction of *non-utilitarian ends*. The use of the latest techniques and the latest technologies for enhancing the fulfilment of desire and the radical realisation of a life no longer subject to the alienation represented by the spectacular.

You have only to think of the manner in which modern anti-capitalists use the Internet and the mobile phone with the intention of subverting the military, scientific, and commercial, purposes, which have given rise to modern telecommunications to have some idea of the way in which Situationists imagined the subversion of the utilitarian purposes of the machine age.

So there are, I think, many points of contact between contemporary attempts to reject capitalism and the radical ideas of the Situationists. However, we should always be very careful that we do not stretch these historical comparisons and analogies too far. Because there are ideas that have a superficial similarity with each other that are in fact quite different – and it is important in this regard not to conflate what are intrinsically different ideas.

A relevant example of this might be the idea of ‘commodification’ deployed by many cultural theorists and by many radicals as a way of attacking the mobilisation of spectacular images of sexuality or friendship or conviviality for the purpose of selling products. This idea, ‘commodification’, has very little to do with the Situationists and

is more properly associated with a different essentialist idea in which 'real life' and 'real relationships' are thought of as being independent of both abstract desire and commerce and have – so to speak – been commercialised by their iconographic association with commodities.

I always have difficulty with this idea of commodification. I can see, for example, that the commodification of sexuality takes place in prostitution. Clearly, a commodity in the form of a service is offered by the prostitute and is purchased by his or her client.

I can see also that pornographic magazines and other kinds of erotic publication are also commodities in which sexual arousal is the use value being exchanged for money.

But I cannot see that the suggestion that I might look wonderfully appealing in a particular kind of shirt or a particular kind of jeans is the same sort of thing.

Advertisers clearly appeal to our vanity, our self-image, to what they suppose are our desires, but I do not think that they are turning our desires into commodities in the process. The relationship between our desires and their commodities are, I think, more complicated than that. They evidently attempt to direct our desires into the direction, and into a form, that would be satisfied or assuaged by the purchase of their commodity. Whether this amounts to the 'commodification' of our desires is consequently a moot point.

What is perhaps more certain is that the *critical assumption* upon which the theory of commodification rests but which is not really ever the subject of detailed

consideration – the negative point so to speak – is the nature of the *essential* or *authentic* feelings or relationships that are being commodified. Theorists who use the notion of commodification do not by and large investigate the characteristics of authentic experience or what might be meant by ‘real’ or authentic feelings – they know what they mean and assume that we will know what they mean – consequently, they focus all attention upon advertising and branding without ever explicitly or precisely discussing nature of the life they wish to defend.

We’ll return to these issues again next week when I’ll talk about advertising in more detail.