

LECTURE 18

The Rational Faith of Anti-Capitalists

I want to be rich and I want lots of money
 I don't care about clever I don't care about funny
 I want loads of clothes and fuckloads of diamonds
 I heard people die while they're trying to find them

And I'll take my clothes off and it will be shameless
 Cause everyone knows that's how you get famous
 I'll look at The Sun and I'll look in The Mirror
 I'm on the right track yeah I'm onto a winner

I don't know what's right and what's real anymore
 And I don't know how I'm meant to feel anymore
 When do you think it will all become clear
 Cause I'm being taken over by The Fear

Life's about film stars and less about mothers
 It's all about fast cars and cussing each other
 But it doesn't matter cause I'm packing plastic
 And that's what makes my life so fucking fantastic

And I am a weapon of massive consumption
 And it's not my fault it's how I'm programmed to function
 I'll look at The Sun and I'll look in The Mirror
 I'm on the right track yeah I'm on to a winner

I don't know what's right and what's real anymore
 And I don't know how I'm meant to feel anymore
 When do you think it will all become clear
 Cause I'm being taken over by The Fear

Forget about guns and forget ammunition
 Cause I'm killing them all on my own little mission
 Now I'm not a saint but I'm not a sinner
 Now everything is cool as long as I'm getting thinner

I don't know what's right and what's real anymore
 And I don't know how I'm meant to feel anymore
 When do you think it will all become clear
 Cause I'm being taken over by The Fear¹

¹ Song lyric: *The Fear*, by Lily Allen and Greg Kurstin, Universal Music Publishing Ltd, 2009, www.lilyallenmusic.com. See also, the song lyric of *The Fame*, by Lady GaGa et. al., Interscope Records, 2008.

When Lily Allen sings in her song *The Fear*,

Life's about film stars and less about mothers
 It's all about fast cars and cussing each other
 But it doesn't matter cause I'm packing plastic
 And that's what makes my life so fucking fantastic²

A marvelous double irony is intended. Here is a popular singer who trades upon the presentation of a luscious sensuality, with great humour, and yet in songs like *The Fear* and *Fuck You*³ demonstrates an acute awareness of the political issues and sensibilities that shape the outlook and predicament of her audience in the rich countries of the West.

And this is the predicament of anti-capitalism and anti-capitalist campaigners in the rich countries. Here we are, as George Orwell might have said, “inside the whale”, like Jonah, stuck in the belly of the beast, attempting simultaneously to both understand and fight against a system which we know continues to shape us and mold us to its purposes. It is indeed a confusing and frightening prospect. As Lily Allen tells us in the chorus of *The Fear*:

I don't know what's right and what's real anymore
 And I don't know how I'm meant to feel anymore
 When do you think it will all become clear
 Cause I'm being taken over by The Fear⁴

Here, she is expressing what can only be described as a kind of vertigo, unease, or radical instability, in which critics of the system in which they live, live lives which they enjoy and enthusiastically embrace much of what capitalism has to offer, in the full belief that through their consumption they are somehow implicated in a system in which ‘murder’ and ‘criminal damage’ is carried out upon a global scale in the pursuit of growth and profit: poverty for the many, and prosperity for the few.

This radical angst is something that is felt, of course, by those embracing the anti-capitalist outlook in rich countries. In poorer countries by contrast, in Venezuela, Bolivia or the Chiapas, for example, anti-capitalism has a sharper signature and is not conflicted in the sense that I have been talking about here. This, of course, does rather undermine the internationalist claims and assumptions of the World Social Forums

² *Ibid.*

³ Song lyric: *Fuck You*, by Lily Allen and Greg Kurstin, Universal Music Publishing Ltd, www.lilyallenmusic.com.

⁴ Song lyric: *The Fear*, by Lily Allen and Greg Kurstin, Universal Music Publishing Ltd, www.lilyallenmusic.com.

and the broader anti-capitalist movement. It is clear that peasants campaigning to preserve their access to water, sweatshop workers fighting for higher wages and healthcare, or child labourers attempting to hang on to their jobs by dodging visiting government and Adidas corporate inspectors, do not live in the same world as anti-capitalist campaigners in North America or Europe. They are only in the most abstract or rhetorical sense, part of the same movement.

They are linked, of course, sometimes by specific campaigns, and sometimes by the work of particular leaders and activists, but they do not, in fact inhabit the same or even a similar reality and consequently, the nature of their opposition to the capitalist system has a different register and tone.

The cultural quandary of anti-capitalists and the anti-capitalist movement in the rich countries is the one that I would like to focus upon – it being, I think, the area of the problem with which we are most familiar.

Much of what we have discussed throughout the course of the last year has revealed the difficulty that the anti-capitalist movement has in elaborating a different future for society. If “another world is possible” we must ask why most anti-capitalist campaigns and movements studiously avoid developing careful systematic critiques of the system or of postulating systemic alternatives to it. We know of course that this reluctance is rooted in a history of catastrophe and failure where the fate of socialist movements and communist republics has radically undermined the idea of the development of a fully elaborated, or ready-made, alternatives to capitalism.

Consequently, modern anti-capitalists have, not unreasonably, concentrated on particular issues and particular wrongs which they fight to correct in the context of a radically unexplored belief of the necessity of overthrowing the system. Bluntly, what identifies people as anti-capitalists is their belief in “putting people before profits”, i.e. a belief that a system, which rests upon private property and more or less free markets cannot meet the needs of the great mass of the people.

It is broadly assumed that an alternative to such a system, one that sidelines profits and private property and “puts people first” lays easily within our grasp, if only we could win over the majority of our peoples to this kind of outlook and project. *Now, given the modern history of Europe, Asia, Southern Africa, Central America and the Caribbean, this is evidently an irrational belief.* It is clear that modern anti-capitalists have no worked-out alternative to arrangements in which resources are allocated and prices are determined by the market. Even in the current economic crisis anti-capitalist campaigns and movements offer no plausible alternative in a situation where one government after another feels compelled to favour giving a freer and freer hand to finance and monopoly capital in order to attack wages and conditions in the hope of restoring profitability.

Consequently, it is necessary to think about the apparent irrationality of the broader objectives and outlook of the anti-capitalist movement. Why are so many obviously bright, intelligent, and committed people, in hock to an idea which seems to have little

or no prospect of success? Getting some way towards answering this seems to me to be the key to beginning to understand anti-capitalism.

When anti-capitalists point to vast inequalities in wealth and power, when they point to waste, ecological damage, and to the seemingly endless spirals of poverty, violence and war, they are generally being *entirely rational*. *They are not imagining or inventing these things. We all know that they are only too real.*

Their irrationality comes at the point at which they insist that “another world is possible” while forgetting to tell us how to get there or failing to develop a coherent account of how we might actually get to “this other world”.

Their refusal might be based on the tradition articulated by Frederick Engels and promoted for many years by the Communist Party that it was idle to speculate how we might actually constitute the society of the future, because after all the society of the future will be made by people in the future in the specific conditions then prevailing.⁵

Or this reluctance to specify how we might create this imagined and “possible”, “other world”, might have more to do with the idea that popular movements and popular struggles will themselves, without being weighed down by the dead weight of history, fashion entirely new kinds of modes of association and entirely new ways of promoting social solidarity which cannot be tightly outlined in advance or, more importantly, independently of the struggle. This is the sort of outlook, canvassed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, by Hilary Wainwright of *Red Pepper*, and many others, and it is certainly a more libertarian and communitarian version of the traditional view outlined by Engels or Emile Burns.

It is in the atmosphere and solidarity of the struggle that anti-capitalists develop their apparently irrational belief in the future. Their belief that another world is possible is bound up with their concrete experience of the creative and organizational power of ordinary people. It is *in the struggle* you are removed from the baleful skepticism of academics, it is *in the struggle* that you test out your own capacities and those of your comrades, it is *in the struggle* that you begin to free yourself from the passivity induced by the mass media, *it is only in the struggle* that you begin to demystify the nature of capitalist social relations. It is only *in the struggle* that the unreality and fear of which Lily Allen sings is dispelled. It is only through the act of taking on the bosses, of fighting against the system that you discover that “another world is possible”.

What I am articulating here is the need for a kind of “rational faith”, in which faith in the future rests upon the concrete evidence that we have of the relentless capacity of people throughout the world and throughout history to fight for justice and to fight for a better life. This capacity, which we can certainly demonstrate in the historical

⁵ See Frederick Engels, *Anti-During: Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science*, translation by Emile Burns [1934], London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1943; and Emile Burns, (1939) *What is Marxism?*, The New People's Library, Vol. XXIV, London: Victor Gollancz, 1939.

record, and attest to in the annals of working people throughout the world, is all the evidence that anti-capitalists need that their faith is both *rational* and *well founded*.

Consequently, anti-capitalists know with absolute certainty that “another world is possible” because of the self-evident truth of the rational faith upon which their struggle against capitalism is built. It is because of this, that anti-capitalism and anti-capitalist sentiment is not at all vulnerable to academic skepticism or the sneers of those enemies who support capitalism and exploitative relations.

This determination and rational faith of anti-capitalists of the past, and the anti-capitalists of the present, anti-capitalists in the revolutionary parties, in the anarchist groups, in the peace committees and the single issue campaigns is I think very well expressed by Bob Dylan’s song, *When the ship comes in*. In this song Dylan expresses the millennial certainty that the oppressors will be defeated in a time and space framed *more by aspiration than by any ordinary temporal notion*. In this sense Dylan clearly expresses the moment of emancipation in Biblical terms and in Biblical time. The defeat of the oppressors will certainly be accomplished, but it will occur in a sense outside of any definite historical time. As the foes awake and see the ship of the revolution heading for the shore, he tells us,

And they'll raise their hands,
Sayin' we'll meet all your demands,
But we'll shout from the bow your days are numbered.
And like Pharaoh's tribe,
They'll be drowned in the tide,
And like Goliath, they'll be conquered.⁶

The fundamental problem with this outlook is, however, that it is predicated upon the idea of the oppressor and the exploiter being a tiny minority of the population. Anti-capitalists tend to conceive of capitalism being vested in great monopolies, in powerful corporations, represented by comparatively small numbers of people. There is little attempt to grasp the genuinely popular nature of the system.

Of course, there are monopolies, there are great companies, which wield enormous power and influence, but this does not explain the genuinely popular nature of capitalism in the richer countries of the West.

- Monopoly
- Finance Capital
- Big Business
- The destruction of Medium and Small Business

It is natural for people to believe that this is happening; this is because in our ordinary experience as consumers it does appear as if big shops always do swallow up the

⁶ Bob Dylan, *When the ship comes in*, recorded in 1963 and released on *The Times They are A-Changin*, 1964.

smaller ones. The expansion of *Tesco Express* and *Sainsbury's Local* will without doubt destroy a good many corner shops and small businesses.

In a world where Wal-Mart has a bigger turnover than the Gross Domestic Product of Pakistan and where Wal-Mart has more employees [2.1 million] than there are people in Latvia – Wal-Mart a distributor that appears to be sweeping everything before it – it can certainly seem as if giant corporations are set fair to swallow the business activity of the entire society.

However, the real picture is much more diverse and complicated than this retail hyper-market; it is much more complicated than homogenised retail high streets and shopping malls might lead us to suppose.

- 67% of the population are buying their own homes – when set against the hundred thousand or so families who are classified as homeless – home ownership is enormous.⁷
- There are some 250,000-second homes in Britain – this is only 1 per cent of the total housing stock, but it is absolutely a very large number
- On top of this, some quarter of a million people from the UK own second homes abroad

From all this it becomes clear that capitalism is not a conspiracy. It is not a system that can simply be characterised as a relatively small group of closely connected people running things on their own behalf against the rest of us. This may be what capitalism seems to be in Venezuela or in Russia but it is not what capitalism is in the rich countries of the West.

Capitalism in the rich West (including Japan and South Korea and Australasia) is not simply a mode of production in which relatively small cliques of well-to-do people use private property to employ workers to produce surplus value and profits. Capitalism in the West is a mass phenomenon in which millions of people participate in the process of accumulating assets of one sort or another – assets which they use to generate income by combining some elements of their private property with the labour of workers in order to produce profits and surplus value.

[MORTGAGES, SAVINGS, PENSION FUNDS, MICRO-ENTERPRISES
AND SMALL BUSINESSES]

⁷ As a consequence of a period of rising house prices, high interest rates, and wage stagnation, this figure had fallen (by January 2008) to around 69%. It will have been further eroded by the disappearance of credit and repossessions, but it will still, by the end of 2011, be by some considerable measure, above 65%.

This is the principal difference between capitalism in the rich West and capitalism in the poorer countries of the world. The poor in developing or poor countries do not possess the capacity to turn what few assets, savings or small property which they may well possess in tools, equipment, jewellery, buildings, land, into capital or into tradable or fungible assets.

This is because they cannot use their property or their assets as collateral to raise credit; they cannot turn their assets into forms of property, which would enable them to develop businesses or allow them to buy into economic activity, which is wider than their immediate family or wider than their immediate neighbourhood.

Throughout the poor countries of the world there are millions of poor people full of energy, people capable of working hard, of saving hard, of buying and selling, of working their land, or building their own shacks and houses, of learning new things, of developing themselves who are unable to do so *because they cannot turn these assets into capital* – because they often find it almost impossible to use their assets to produce surplus wealth for themselves.

In the West millions of ordinary working people have been *incorporated* into the capitalist system. Many millions of people in the West are able to use their savings and the property, which they are able to accumulate to increase their own wealth and security by finding something useful to do with their assets. *This is the principal difference between the rich countries and the poor countries.*

In poor countries Capitalism excludes most of the people – the form which capitalism has taken has meant that for many people capitalism is just something for the elite – capitalism appears to be a system that only benefits those who are already rich. In poor countries capitalism appears to be a system in which poor people are permanently prevented from developing themselves; capitalism appears to be a system in which most people are excluded from full participation.

This is because in poor countries, unlike throughout the West, capitalism does not guarantee the right of everybody to register their ownership of property. Because poor people are often unable to establish or fix the legal title of ownership of their assets they cannot use their property as collateral for loans. They cannot use their property to make money in the way that millions of people do within the much richer more fully developed capitalist economies.

This is because capitalism in its fully developed form is a type of society shaped by a particular legal code – a legal code which allows everybody in society to establish or fix the fact of their ownership of physical assets within a legal system that applies to *all sorts of property* and *is available to every person*.

The rich capitalist countries struggled throughout the nineteenth century to establish these universal legal codes which guaranteed the right of everybody to establish and protect their title to everything from their own sewing machine to an acre of land; to establish and protect their title to everything from the lyric of a song they had written

or a machine they had invented to a house or a share in a business that they had bought. This process by which every species and type of property became *protected by a common set of laws* organised within a *single* legal system which applied to everybody made it possible for more and more people as capitalism developed to turn their small savings and small property into tradable or fungible assets – as a result *a mode of life* (as opposed to a “system”) developed in which millions upon millions of people participated to a greater or lesser extent in the development of capitalist relations.

Evidently, if capitalism in poor countries is simply allowed to continue to be a system in which relatively small groups of people are allowed to participate – *a system in which the poor are never permitted to gain a foothold* – then capitalist development will grind to a halt as governments spend most of their time and money suppressing riots and insurrections among the millions of people entirely excluded from the capitalism.

So, *those in the grip of the rational faith of anti-capitalism*, tend to have a singular view of the capitalist mode of life in which the distinctions between the poor world and the rich world are repeatedly effaced in the interests of forms of rhetoric and analysis which seek to grasp the nature of the capitalist “system” as a kind of global whole.

Consequently, the manifest failure of the “capitalist system” in poor countries is attributed to the nature of the “system” itself rather than the failure of the political class in particular countries and regions to incorporate the great mass of ordinary workers and peasants into the capitalist mode of life as full citizens and active and independent participants in the economic life of the society.

It remains to be seen how the anti-capitalist movement faces up to the challenges of the present crisis and the wars and upheavals of the future. But you can rest assured that relentless and spirited struggle against a system based on free waged labour, private property, and the market will continue for some considerable time to come.