

LECTURE 05:

Living in the Future – Right Now! The Politics of Lifestyle

The last verse of Randy Newman's old song, 'Political Science', is particularly interesting.

Boom goes London and boom Paree//
More room for you and more room for me
And every city the whole world round//
Will be just another American town//
Oh, how peaceful it will be//
We'll set everybody free//
You'll wear a Japanese kimono//
And there'll be Italian shoes for me//

They all hate us anyhow//
So let's drop the big one now//
Let's drop the big one now//¹

Apart from bitter satire Randy Newman's lyric makes a serious prediction – Every city the whole world round// Will just be another American town. The desperate irony of these two lines expresses a profound truth. Capitalism has a tendency to homogenise culture and to extend the dominant relations associated with generalised commodity production to the farthest reaches of the earth. This was the case when Britain was the leading capitalist country, and it remains the case after more than half a century of American pre-eminence.

¹ Randy Newman, 'Political Science', *Sail Away*, Reprise Records (2064-2), May 1972, http://www.randynewman.com/tocdiscography/disc_sail_away/ accessed 26/10/05.

It appears to be in the nature of the system of generalised commodity production that all other kinds of systems and sets of social relations will, in time, be subordinated to capitalist relations in which production for profit is the primary engine of economic and social development. And, furthermore, working for wages, for an employer whose primary goal in producing commodities is making profits, will be a more or less a universal experience.

Through the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in one area after another the rural gave way to the urban, the wilderness gave way to extensively managed cultivation. The areas of the globe in which the previous modes of production, communal hunting and gathering, chattel slavery, serfdom and peonage, and intermediate sorts of society in which the agriculture and handicraft production of free or independent peasant households predominated, gave way to capitalist relations, in region after region, and in country after country.

[Servile Labour – most pre-capitalist kinds of society were dominated by servile labour of one sort or another]

By the last quarter of the twentieth century communal hunters and gatherers were reduced to a few pockets in which very small communal societies, of at most a thousand or so people, survive here and there, in remote and inaccessible places. Chattel slavery [where people are literally owned and bought and sold] hangs on in some parts of the Sahara and in a few other places. Feudal relations, within which,

large landlords manage peasant populations through control of rents, credit and debt, continue to exist in some regions. And, where independent peasant agriculture continues to exist it is being steadily eroded or dominated by the needs of urban development, by industrial domination of water resources, by mining, forestry, or agribusiness. Indeed, the process of globalisation, noted by Marx a hundred and fifty years ago in the *Communist Manifesto*, has developed so far and so fast that it is not an exaggeration to say that the entire world is now dominated by capitalist relations of production – this is true because even those areas that are of little interest to capital – those places which attract little or no investment – are generally in a state of collapse where famine, civil strife and disorder frame their relations – they find themselves in a world where traditional kinds of economic and social relations have collapsed and new capitalist ones have yet to emerge.

So, the process of capitalist development has profoundly altered the relationship between human beings and nature. The rural has been replaced by the urban, and the life of the small town or regional centre has been replaced by that of very large towns, big cities and by giant metropolitan areas – or mega-cities – in which people strive to find employment for wages and to build the kind of life which they find satisfactory or attractive.

[*The City of God* – slum proletariat – e.g. Lula – people flee from the land]

However, in the past people did not choose how they would live. They lived in the manner according to the level of their society's technology and their society's physical and environmental circumstances. People living within technical and environmental situations, closely circumscribed by essentially local conditions, produced a rich variety of different cultures in which the way of life of its members, *whether* and *how* or *when* they would marry, when they would establish their own household's, how they should dress, and how they should conduct themselves with friends, relatives, or strangers, was dictated by tradition. No matter how a particular cultural practice was legitimated or explained by reference to religion or other kind of spiritual ideas, these traditional modes of conduct governed every aspect of people's lives and left little room for particular individuals to determine how they should live. The economic relations and the social traditions were bound together in such a manner as would admit little or no variation.

In these circumstances there was no such thing as 'lifestyle'. Before the full

development of capitalism 'lifestyles' did not exist. As David Chaney expresses it:

“Lifestyles are therefore part of the everyday social life of the modern world and, if my initial presupposition is right, they function in interaction in ways that would be incomprehensible to those who do not live in modern society.²

Of course, in many pre-capitalist forms of society the rulers always had some leeway in determining how they would live, but wealthy or powerful individuals in feudal or other kinds of society probably did not have the conception that they could determine

² David Chaney, *Lifestyles*, London & New York: Routledge, 2002, p.4.

or fashion what sort of person they would be *independent* of the social position in which they were born or the traditional expectations of those around them.

[Sumptuary laws, and other modes of conduct, appropriate to ones class, social status, or caste, or occupation.]

In this respect capitalist relations in resting upon the idea of the individual free wage labourer – the person free to work for whom they please – largely free to move from one employer to another or from one town to another – free to move from one trade or occupation to another – an individual largely free of traditional restrictions – has created an unprecedented set of circumstances in which people are *apparently* free to determine what sort of person they shall be.

It is not, of course, an entirely smooth ride, traditional ideas concerning gender, race, and sexual orientation, continue in different ways to configure and disfigure the lives of millions of people within capitalist society. Indeed, within the earlier phase of capitalist development both chattel slavery and some kinds of feudal relations were employed in the course of the development of what Adam Smith called ‘commercial society’. However, it is precisely *within capitalist society* during the second half of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century that the struggle for women’s rights, racial equality, and finally, homosexual equality, have come to the fore. We can see by the historical experience of Western Europe and North America that capitalist relations of production were fully developed before the weighty stone of tradition started to be rolled away by the forces of individual autonomy and choice.

[Indeed class in Britain 50s and 60s, Desegregation 1955-1965, and the battle for women's rights – contracts, colleges, etc.]

So, although capitalist relations of production have by no means *automatically* liberated people from the toils of relationships determined largely by tradition, and by prejudices explained or justified by tradition, the emergence of *generalised wage labour* in the circumstances of *generalised commodity production* have created individuals *who regard themselves as individuals with the right largely to determine their own mode of life and their own mode of conduct* without reference to parents or relatives, community elders, religious leaders, traditional landlords, or hereditary rulers or employers.

As David Chaney has it:

“The language of social structure is reflexive in every form of society, but the characteristic becomes particularly significant in the social changes of modernity. This is because as the rigidities of established distinction become increasingly hard to sustain in eras of rapid social and physical mobility, new forms of distinction are continually being elaborated and therefore the manner of our concern with the respect for (or repugnance against) the various possible modes of other's civilisation becomes crucial in constituting normative hierarchies of structured difference. My emphasis upon the language of social structure directs attention to the more general theme of the reflexive character of modernity's endemic concern with social identity, distinction and difference.³

What we have in this kind of sociological account is a recognition that although traditional social structures always possessed some elements of self-conscious management and flexibility, *in modern society this self-conscious reflection upon*

³ David Chaney, 2002, p.6.

rapidly changing circumstances has produced individuals who “use lifestyles in everyday life to identify and explain wider complexes of identity and affiliation. They are part of the practical vocabularies of everyday life: ‘life-styles are artificial creations or adoptions. The bearer himself is aware of the fact that the style can be donned and discarded at will and, therefore, it can be acted out with some degree of self-irony and self-satire’.”⁴

[Dress, manners, etc./The Glamour of the young/ Extreme version of this is/ camp. . .dressing up. . .The passing gaze in the glass]

Now, socialists and anti-capitalists have encountered these developments with some measure of ambivalence – particularly with regard to the manner in which individual reflexivity has produced a proliferation of lifestyles in the context of mass consumption.

[Now, I do not want to dwell upon consumption today, because I will be talking about it in Lecture 6, and about Advertising in some detail in Lecture 8]

However, socialist ambivalence in this regard arose particularly in relation to what has been dubbed ‘moral paternalism’ in which women, children, (and of course gay men), are regarded as the principal victims of the blandishments of advertisers and of a love of shopping.

⁴ David Chaney, 2002, p.12; and J. Bensman, A. J. Vidich, ‘Changes in the lifestyles of American Classes’, in A. J. Vidich, ed., *The New Middle Classes: Life-styles, Status Claims, and Political Orientations*, London: Macmillan, 1995, p.239.

The apparent dependence of people upon lifestyles shaped by the manner of their consumption, what kinds of goods and services they consume, how they arrange their furniture, their lighting and what they regard as 'good taste', what they think is fashionable, and the cultural practices, expectations and behaviours that go with them, are an anathema to many anti-capitalists.

This is because the opponents of capitalism generally suppose that the 'desires' and 'needs' of those hooked on shopping and conspicuous consumption are not 'real' desires or 'authentic' needs at all, but are in reality entirely artificial desires manufactured by the very people who want to sell the consumers the goods.

Consequently, people who consciously shape their lives around the kinds of goods and services that they choose to consume are thought of as 'suckers' manipulated by advertisers and marketing agencies. Such people are thought to have fallen hook-line-and-sinker for meretricious and facile promises that cannot possibly be delivered by the consumption of the goods and services on offer.

This left-wing account in which the benefits of many products are thought of as illusory or wasteful or both, depends for its force upon ignoring the irony and reflexivity at work among the mass of consumers. There is a tendency upon the left to regard those in the grip of the glamour of mass consumption as if they were unaware of the forces at work. *In fact, of course, the mass of consumers are well aware of the artifice at play in the matrix of products, services, practices and desires within which*

they attempt to compose their lifestyle. Indeed, the many advertisers and marketing people involved understand only too well the degree to which they have to address their potential customers *in the full knowledge* that their customers know exactly what is at stake when, for example, buying stylishly ripped and worn-out jeans for large sums of money.

Consequently, the old socialist argument about waste and the manufacture of illusory desires has lost much of its force. However, by and large, modern Anti-capitalists, do not attach great importance consciously to shaping their own lifestyles by the pattern of their consumption. ‘Trivial’ matters like fashion or ‘must have’ objects or products do not dominate them. They are much more concerned by the quality of interpersonal relationships, community values and common sharing.

It is true that vegetarianism might be regarded as a legitimate life-style choice, Macdonald’s and Starbucks and conspicuous labels might be off-limits, and that absorption by reality TV, soap operas, or particular kinds of pop, or particular kinds of holiday deal, might be thought of as tacky. Anti-capitalists, are however, engaged in a kind of *negative consumption* where forms of music, dress, and entertainment are designated as not ‘really’ commercial, or at any rate, not really the products of in-yer-face commercialisation or, dare I say it, commodification. There is a preference for the home-made or thrown-together product or event – for modes of spontaneity in which more *human* values are thought to be given greater expression, if not an entirely free rein.

[Da! Collective: Mayfair Squatters of £6.5 million mansion Oct/Nov 2008]

In the review of Daylite Robbery and Strangewaz we are told that they are:

“An overachieving, motivated, highly skilled, anarchistic collective. They just don’t stop. Playing Hip-Hop warm ups, through, Drum and Bass, Jungle, Techno, Trance, and lap top shenanigans. When the whole crew is together they have mental visuals and create a free, open, intense atmosphere. Despite power supply troubles, scally warfare, the elements, drugstorms and the bloody police this team manage to survive. I mean survive, if you want something fixed, your motor, generator, amplifiers, speakers, even your head. Then make sure you ask these guys.

This Indymedia contributor continues in the same breathless vein for some time: “The crews are not motivated by money but a love of all people and the idea of coming together in freedom. Crews’ making a party is only a start, like the experiments of a child.” Free parties, raves or festivals, “question the false preconceptions and limitations of marketed mainstream culture. They are not motivated by profit but love.”⁵

In some senses this is probably all true. However, the same may be said of suburban gardening clubs, Church attendance, and amateur dramatic productions in scout huts and village halls. Many activities are not motivated by profit, even if somebody does actually make a profit out of it – profit is often not the reason why people shape their lives in particular ways or why they engage in mainstream activities like Salsa classes or strictly ballroom, or cookery, or swanning around the shops at every available opportunity.

⁵ The "Mental" Hospital Parties, Nemo, 13.05.2005, 13:51, Culture/Free Spaces/ Manchester Indymedia UK, <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2005/05/311194.html>, accessed 21 June 2005.

However, the Indymedia contributor is has put his finger upon the difficulty in which anti-capitalists find themselves within capitalist society. Because bailing out of capitalism is not really an option – capitalism has does not have an ‘outside’ – anti-capitalists are confronted with the necessity of attempting to give expression, *in the here and now*, to the anti-capitalist life which they would like to live. *In a manner similar, to the rest of the population they have to shape their anti-capitalist lifestyle through the products and services they consume, and through the practices and activities in which they engage.*

Some, of course, continue to organise through hierarchical political parties and groups in which the organisational methods of ‘Democratic Centralism’ are practiced. Others work through hierarchical political structures of a more flexible and liberal nature. For socialists who opt for these kinds of practice, the formal political nature of the political programme and the round of political organising and mobilising that goes with it defines the nature of their commitment to the eventual overthrow of capitalism. Their lifestyle is that of party activists rather than party goers.

There is here, of course, an expression of the historic tension between socialists who believe that it is vitally necessary to find ways of developing or prefiguring more meaningful communal relations *in the here and now* before the destruction of capitalism and those who, like Frederick Engels, believe that it is impossible to

develop proper alternative modes of life *before* the overthrow of capitalism.

[Socialism, Utopian and Scientific]

For other kinds of anti-capitalist, those outside the political parties and Trotskyist or Stalinist groupuscule there is a frank rejection of hierarchy. As the Independent Media Centre UK Mission Statement explains:

We aim to live up to the following principles:

- Indymedia United Kollektives works on a non-hierarchical basis
- we reject all systems of domination and discrimination
- we acknowledge that the struggle for a better world takes many forms. The focus of the Indymedia UK collective is on grassroots politics, actions and campaigns
- Indymedia United Kollektives does not have any ties with political parties or larger NGOs
- we understand that by lobbying there will be no radical change. As a collective our attitude is assertive, and where necessary confrontational⁶

After this list of revolutionary principles the authors make clear that they reject the mainstream corporate media and its inherent strong bias towards the power structure of capitalism.

Consequently, unlike the mainstream media, which they accuse of concealing its biases and alignments, Indymedia will, on the contrary, be completely open and explicit about its subjectivity.

⁶ IMC UK, 26.06.2003 00:57, Indymedia United Kollektives, <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/static/mission.html>, accessed 21 June 2005.

In this way, they are, *in the here and now* attempting to prefigure the relations they would like to exist in the future when capitalism is no more. As they spell out in their statement they clearly believe that their mode of operation, their style of living and working, is *in the here and now* helping to break down the way capitalism works and opening up the possibility of living and working in a different manner. As they explicitly say: “Through this system of ‘Direct Media’, Indymedia erodes the dividing line between reporters and reported, between active producers and passive audience: people are enabled to speak for themselves.”⁷

In these different ways, many in the collectives and activity centred groups, which compose the movements, which make up the anti-capitalist movement hope through lifestyles, built as much around their political commitment, as around the kind of food, clothes, or music, they regard as in some way expressive of their rejection of pro-capitalist values and rampant consumerism.

⁷ IMC UK Mission Statement.