

Richard Hamilton's pop art critique of contemporary consumer society "Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?"



isn't true in that it assumes that the economy responds to consumer demand, whereas in fact it responds to changes in the rate of profit, while most people's "demand" is limited by the size of their wage packet or salary cheque.

That capitalism is not the most efficient way of providing for people's material needs - and that socialism as a system of common ownership, democratic control and production just for use would do this much better - is the traditional socialist case against capitalism. And it retains all its validity. But, after the last World War, in the 50s and 60s capitalism in North America and Western Europe appeared to live up to its promise of material prosperity for most people through the emergence of the so-called "consumer society". But then another, different criticism of capitalism appeared: that while it might have solved more or less adequately the problem of "bread", of dire material want, for most people in these parts of the world, it had still not created a satisfactory society.

Books began to appear in America with such titles as *The Lonely Crowd*, *The Organization Man*, *The Hidden Persuaders*, *The Waste Makers*, *One-Dimensional Man*, all critical of various aspects of the "consumer society" as a society in which people were encouraged to regard the acquisition of more and more consumer goods as the main aim in life. In Europe, such criticism took on a more explicitly anti-capitalist form. In France the critical books bore such titles as *A Critique of Everyday Life* and the *Society of the Spectacle*. The argument was that in the "consumer society" (called instead, more accurately in fact, "commodity society") the logic of buying something to passively consume had spread from the purchase of material goods to other aspects of everyday life - to how people spent their leisure time and to how they related to each other.

This type of criticism added another dimension to the socialist case against capitalism: that it not only failed to organise the satisfaction of material needs properly but that it also degraded - dehumanised - the "quality of life".

It's not clear to whom the credit for developing this "cultural criticism" of capitalism should go. The Frankfurt School of Marxism (Fromm, Marcuse and others), the Situationists, even radical journalists in America like Vance Packard, would be among the candidates. In any event they were all working on the basis of the observable fact of the degrading effect capitalism was having on the *quality* of everyday life by spreading commercial values more and more widely.

It's a powerful criticism of capitalism. Perhaps even these days, in this part of the world, a more powerful criticism than the traditional socialist one that capitalism brings material poverty to most people. Certainly, on a world scale, there are hundreds of millions in dire material poverty. And there are few millions in this country - around 15 percent of the population - who are materially deprived. But we can't say this of the majority of the population here. Most people in Britain don't have a problem about getting three meals a day, decent clothes, heating, don't

Capitalism and the quality of life

Capitalism is a society where nearly all the things that humans need or want are articles of commerce, things made to be bought and sold. This is not a complete definition since under capitalism one thing in particular becomes a commodity - the human ability to work and to create things, what Marx called "labour power" - and this is in fact the defining feature of capitalism. It's a commodity society in which labour-power is a commodity.

This has two consequences. The first is that there is not simply production for sale but production for profit. And secondly, most things that humans need or want tend to become commodities, i.e. have to be bought. It is not difficult to see why. The wages system means that most people are dependent, for satisfying their needs, on the money they are paid for the sale of the one saleable commodity they do possess (their labour power), money which they then use to buy what they must have to live. So the "commodification" of labour power means

the commodification of food, of clothes, of accommodation, and of other, less material wants too.

One of the things that the spread of capitalism meant, in concrete terms, was the spread of money-commodity relations. It's a process that's still going on in parts of the world and which even conventional economists speak of as integrating formerly largely self-sufficient subsistence farmers in Asia, Africa and Latin America into the "money economy".

What we are talking about here is the commodification of people's material needs. Some people might not find this objectionable. Some even find it a progressive, even a liberating development. In fact this is one of the standard defences of capitalism - that the money economy gives people the freedom to choose what to consume by how they spend their money and that this is the most efficient way of organising the satisfaction of people's material needs and wants. Of course this



Above: Marcuse. Right: Fromm

have to go to the pawnbrokers or live in vermin-invested rooms. In fact, the commodification of the "wants of the mind" is based on the fact that most people have money to spend on satisfying wants over and above those of "the stomach". If people didn't have this discretionary purchasing power after having satisfied their material needs, then there would be no market for cultural and entertainment products for capitalism to stimulate, manipulate and exploit. (As to why people have this "extra" money to spend on entertainment, it will have something to do with increased intensity and stress at work requiring more relaxation - more escapism - for people to recreate their particular ability to work.)

The criticism of "consumer society" was not just that it represented the invasion and colonisation of every aspect of social life by money-commodity relations, but that it also encouraged passive consumption rather than active participation. There is a great deal of validity in this point - that the "consumer society" is one where, sometimes literally, people sit in armchairs

watching the passing show provided for them. This is a criticism of people's lack of participation is shaping their lives, a lack that was also reflected politically where "democracy" is conceived of as merely choosing every four or five years between rival would-be elites (using in fact marketing techniques to attract support). Instead of people making their own sport or their own entertainment - or politics - they consume them as a pre-packaged commodity.

There must be something wrong with a society in which, instead of people living their own lives and interacting with their neighbours in a human way, they sit in front of a screen watching actors perform artificial scenes based on exaggerations of everyday life and identifying with the fictitious characters in these programmes. And in which the most widely-read newspapers don't discuss real events so much as the artificial ones portrayed in these programmes and the lives and loves of the leading actors who play in them - as well as those of other so-called "celebrities" from the world of sport and entertainment.

As long as capitalism lasts, the quality of life will continue to decline. There's nothing that can be done to stop this within the context of capitalism as it is due to capitalism, representing, as it does, the dissolving effects on society of the spread of money-commodity relations into all aspects of life. So, despite the slow, but undeniable increase in material living standards in certain parts of the world the case for socialism as a non-commercial society in which human welfare and human values will be the guiding

principle retains all its relevance. With the common ownership of the means of life, there could and would be production directly to satisfy human needs and wants and not for sale with a view to profit - the death of the commodity, the end of what William Morris called "commercial society" - and a classless community with a genuinely common interest in which humans can relate to each other as human beings and not as social atoms colliding with each other on the market-place as commodity buyers and sellers. ■

ADAM BUICK



Cooking the Books (2)

The Property Rights Act

When Labour got back into office in 1997, one of

the first things they did, to show without spending any money that they were reformers, was to sign up to the European Convention on Human Rights. This was supposed to give people more legal "rights". Actually, as infringements could give rise to monetary compensation, it was more a bonanza for lawyers and has resulted in the further spread of "compensation culture", capitalism's tendency to put a monetary value on everything.

But it has also had another effect: to entrench further the rights of property, as two recent legal cases have shown (*Times*, 18 April and 23 November). Before the entry into force of the 1998 Human Rights Act, "squatters" acquired a legal right

to a property after occupying it unchallenged for at least 12 years.

The cases involved property companies which had acquired titles to land which had been squatted by farmers for more than the 12 years. The companies relied on an article of the Convention that states: "Every natural person is entitled to the peaceful enjoyment of his possessions. No one shall be deprived of his possessions except in the public interest and subject to the conditions provided by law."

The judges in both cases (the second those of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasburg from which there is no appeal) ruled that the previous English law that allowed the farmers to assume ownership of the land was an infringement of the property companies' rights as enshrined in the Convention. As a result they will receive as compensation a nice fat cheque, likely to run in one case to millions of pounds.

So-called "human rights" have always been linked to

property rights. As C.B. Macpherson showed in his classic study of 16th and 17th English political philosophy, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, the whole concept of human rights was based on the idea of every human being having a property right to their own body. The state is not supposed to stop them using their mental and physical energies as they think fit; this involves not just freedom from arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, but also the freedom to exercise their mental faculties in speech, publication and religion.

Property as such came to be regarded as a human right when it was argued that humans also had a right to what they themselves had got from nature by their own bodily efforts, i.e. by their own labour. However, given the existing unequal ownership of property, especially land, the bourgeois "theorists of possessive individualism" shied away from the egalitarian implications of this labour theory of property. Instead they came up with various more or less

specious reasons as to why property, however acquired (and including land, which no one created by their labour, and even slaves), was, in the words of the French Revolution's 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, "an inviolable and sacred right".

The freedom of property-owners from arbitrary dispossession by the state was what the French Revolution established in France, but which the so-called Glorious Revolution in England in 1688 and the US Constitution had already established in these countries.

The European Convention of Human Rights is a direct descendant of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man, itself a reflection of the theory of "possessive individualism". It is essentially a Convention on the Rights of Property - as neatly illustrated by the fact that the article under which the property companies won was not some obscure subsection, but Article I of Protocol I entitled "Protection of Property".