

Craving for More and More Wealth. Refusing Capitalism

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Global Research, September 19, 2012

Theme: [Global Economy](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

Capitalism is based on addiction. It encourages people to crave for more and more wealth and more and more products. Ridiculously wealthy people want even more riches, resulting in war, exploitation and the immiseration of working folk. In turn, ordinary people have been encouraged to take out ever greater debts in order to purchase an endless stream of goods of dubious worth. This addictive behaviour is ultimately ruinous for the individual, humankind and the environment, which becomes stripped bare in the process.

Edward Bernays is regarded as the father of advertising, propaganda and public relations. He knew how to manipulate the pleasure and pain centres of the brain and how to get the masses hooked on the products of capitalism. This type of manipulation has been developed and perfected over the past century or so, and we are all subjected to it each and every day. The American Academy of Pediatrics has reported that young people see 3,000 advertisements a day and are exposed to 40,000 different ones per year. It was not without good reason that the late academic Rick Roderick said that modern society would fall apart if it not were based on people's addictions, whether in the form of pharmaceutical drugs or consumer products.

Capitalism does not want a well-informed, educated populace that is aware of its disfranchisement, exploitation and manipulation. It does not require disenchantment and revolutionary murmurs, but acquiescence and passivity from a population that is distracted by infotainment and the advertising industry and its products and looks to its leaders to save it from their fears and confusions.

Take Guatemala in the 1950s, for instance. The US people were subjected to a successful government-backed media campaign of propaganda to tarnish the regime as 'communist' and as part of the 'red threat' from Soviet Russia. The fact was that Guatemala was not in any way connected to the USSR and was merely arranging its economy to benefit its own people, rather than elite US interests. From Guatemala to Congo and from Iran to Vietnam, nationalistic movements were branded 'communist' as an excuse for the US military or CIA to go in and try to overthrow them.

Instead of using propaganda to allay fears that the US public had about the USSR and its aims, the US government used mass media to fuel fear and paranoia that were then manipulated in order to garner support for militarism and empire building. And this continues today. Replace communism, the USSR and the 'evil empire' with al Qaeda, 9/11 and the 'axis of evil', and the propagandist fear-mongering narrative about the ongoing 'war on terror' reads virtually the same.

A similar propagandist model is also used to justify the prevailing neo-liberal economic

agenda. Think of the mantra 'there is no alternative', which the media and politicians like to chime when people question the efficacy of capitalism. This mantra has been accepted by all the major political parties in places like the US and UK. Individualism and 'self-reliance' are endlessly promoted. Anyone suggesting collectivism and equality is painted as an unrealistic dreamer or a heretic.

Indeed, it can be easy to look at the situation today and become excessively pessimistic and negative. Cynicism and apathy can take hold: this is the way of the world is and nothing can or should be done about it. And this is the very stance that is encouraged through the media and by the political system as a way of preventing people seeking out emancipatory alternatives.

The state provision of welfare, education, health services and the role of the public sector are undermined by platitudes about 'individual responsibility' and the market constituting the best method for supplying human needs. The same attitude prevails when it comes to protecting the environment. Nothing must be allowed to stop the raping of the land because this is positive, this is 'growth'. The hallowed 'greed is good' mantra persists.

Much of this indoctrination comes virtually voluntarily through the act of switching on your TV or computer and accessing the net, and all too often it goes unnoticed. The most benign method of propaganda can be the most effective. Take those 40,000 commercials that youngsters see each year. They are all underpinned by free market dogma, which serves to bind the individual to the commodity and portray social relations under capitalism as somehow natural, the outcome of 'human nature'. And this becomes engrained from an early age as 'common sense' among many ordinary folk who sneer at those who challenge capitalism, while embracing a system whose only aim is to stab them in their collective back and bleed them dry for the benefit of the few. The system promotes a mass mindset that is immune to the lies.

Traditional media such as TV has much to answer for in conveying this dogma. And, increasingly, so does digital technology. From Google to Facebook, and from the surveillance obsessed UK to the unfolding surveillance biometric-database-supporting Indian regime, we find ourselves spied on and our everyday actions monitored and evaluated so that we can be targeted more precisely for ever more PR, advertising and, if we step out of line, police action.

Too many people now see through the lies of economic neo-liberal hegemony and capitalism, however, and realise that the encouragement of cynicism and apathy and of trivializing or ridiculing dissent and dissenters is part and parcel of the propaganda..

Herbert Marcuse once wrote about the 'great refusal' as a strategy for not participating in the rituals and beliefs of advanced capitalism. Challenging the notion that freedom is to be found in craving for and celebrating the products and icons that chain people to an enslaving system in the belief that this constitutes freedom and happiness is also part of that refusal.

"The moment the slave resolves that he will no longer be a slave, his fetters fall. He frees himself and shows the way to others. Freedom and slavery are mental states." - Mahatma Gandhi

The challenge lies in developing communities that engender a sense of camaraderie stemming from collective self-help and face-to-face interaction, rather than mass communications that are used to control and mislead. We must move away from the blind drive towards urbanization in places like India and falsely equating well-being or 'happiness' with addiction to consumer goods. The shift should involve placing more emphasis on self sustaining local communities in which agriculture and local food sovereignty is central and where there is sustainable use of the environment. And this is as true for the rich countries as it is for the poorer ones.

We must do this because if we don't, we are in line for more of the same: an ever spiral of misery, war, subterfuge and deceit.

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