

Revolution in the high street

Can a revolt of 'consumers' spark a revolution?

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"The Middle Class Proletariat — The middle classes could become a revolutionary class, taking the role envisaged for the proletariat by Marx. The globalization of labour markets and reducing levels of national welfare provision and employment could reduce peoples' attachment to particular states. The growing gap between themselves and a small number of highly visible super-rich individuals might fuel disillusion with meritocracy, while the growing urban under-classes are likely to pose an increasing threat to social order and stability, as the burden of acquired debt and the failure of pension provision begins to bite. Faced by these twin challenges, the world's middle-classes might unite, using access to knowledge, resources and skills to shape transnational processes in their own class interest." — ['UK Ministry of Defence report, The DCDC Global Strategic Trends Programme 2007-2036'](#) (Third Edition) p.96, March 2007

Prescient words indeed, so given the dire straits of capitalism as the effects of rampant speculation and an economy based upon the illusory creation of wealth bite, does this analysis by the MoD have any substance?

The power of big, transnational capital has transformed not only the economic landscape but also the nature of the way we live — from the food we eat (and where we buy it) to the fundamental fabric of our social spaces, and judging by the level of dissatisfaction with contemporary capitalist society, great swathes of the population are not happy bunnies.

But unlike earlier epochs, this dissatisfaction, lacking a coherent political voice is finding other other outlets and expressions.

With a population trapped in debt that now extends to their offspring, the 'good times' of the past dozen years have come to an end with a bang and, as the effects of climate change and the chaos caused by 'globalization' (revamped imperialism by another name) and the increased destabilization as endless war becomes the only 'solution' for the crisis of capitalism, what are the chances for bringing about an end to the madness of capitalism?

The Left, itself the product of a society that effectively no longer exists, has failed either to recognize this transformation, nor produce a theoretical framework that we can use to bring about radical change.

Five gigantic supermarket chains dominate the retail food supply in the UK and because of their lock over the market they dictate not only the price but also the type, quality and source of the food they sell.

Yet 75% of all the food grown and produced in the UK originates from small producers.

Unfortunately, for the small farmer, they cannot supply it at the price demanded by the supermarket monopolies, nor do it all year round, whereas food from the developing world is not only cheaper but is also available on demand. Globalization has broken the organic and historical link between agricultural production and consumption.

One-third of the £20 billion spent annually on clothes and household goods in the UK are purchased in the eight-week period prior to Christmas. The much-vaunted consumer economy however, is largely an illusion as it runs almost entirely on credit/debt. The credit comes from the vast surplus extracted by the banking and investment sector through its control and ownership of the global circuit of capital which in turn it lends to consumers and charges interest on the loan.

By contrast, only a small percentage of the UK's GDP comes from manufacturing, we are effectively no longer a manufacturing economy, merely a consuming one. The 'wealth' we possess now has two sources: credit (or debt) via the financial sector which in turn funds the credit economy (well until recently that is). Obviously, it's a closed loop as no *real* wealth is being produced, in other words it's a parasitic economy that depends entirely on the hold big capital has over the global circuit of capital and the extraction of surplus from a desperate and an increasingly impoverished developing world. Thus industrial capitalism has been almost entirely replaced by commercial capitalism.

So what are the implications of this transformation and how should we address it?

With the demise of the organized working class through the destruction of its industrial trade unions (aside from the public employees' unions and importantly, the state is now the single largest employer) and the total destruction of working class communities as the manufacturing industries were done away with, traditional solidarity based in communities and the workplace have also disappeared.

Alongside this with the polarization of society into a debt-laden 'middle class' and an alienated 'under-class' locked away in 'sink estates', the corporate, security state seems secure. It has all the necessary 'laws' in place to crush any real dissent that challenges the power of the state in any meaningful way.

Indeed, it has succeeded in pitting one section of working people against the other by for example, demonizing and criminalizing the youth of the working class, creating an atmosphere of fear and paranoia through a complicit media (eg, "perceptions of crime" running rampant, 'anti-social behaviour', 'binge drinking', 'knife crime', 'youth gangs'), truly a return to the Victorian world of a 'criminal class'. In this the state/media have succeeded in getting working people to devour each other rather than focus on the true cause of society's fragmentation, capitalism.

Yet in spite of our depoliticized and alienated existence, this is a society that is fracturing along a plethora of fault lines, fault lines that are finding an expression but not in the 'traditional' way, that is through class struggle.

Instead, we see so-called special interest groups, largely from the 'middle class' seeking all manner of 'alternatives' that include building 'green' lifestyles like food allotments, 'sustainable' energy projects, recycling, nostalgic trips into a (largely fictitious) past ('heritage'), a search for 'Britishness'—many of whom, not surprisingly as the self-same people work in the media—find expression through a flood of TV and radio programmes.

Collectively, it smacks of elitism, but it can be argued that these are luxury projects and what happens when the money runs out?

On the other hand, there is no doubt that the allure of consumer capitalism is fading even before it runs out of road and this process is accelerating as the crisis of capital bites home and the cost of living soars. Thus there is some kind of synthesis taking place between real needs and reality but it lacks viable expressions.

Could it be that as the MoD paper says, "Faced by these twin challenges, the world's middle-classes might unite, using access to knowledge, resources and skills to shape transnational processes in their own class interest", and if so, where is the Left in this process?

If this is indeed an accurate reflection of processes currently in formation how are these two sections of the proletariat to find a common ground without some kind of collective expression?

Currently, the existing Left all but ignores the so-called middle class, the professionals, managers, media workers, intellectuals and academics who actually run capitalism (aside that is, from those who ironically make up the leadership of the Left)?

Crucial to this process are the public service workers, without which the state is powerless. Could some alliance of the remaining organized working class and the professional middle class bring about revolutionary change?

I contend that much depends on how the current crisis of capital pans out. If, as seems to be the case, the international capitalist class is bent on using an endless series of wars to solve the crisis of accumulation as a 'solution', then things look really dismal.

Thus exposing the 'war on terror', indeed the war on the planet and its peoples' as intrinsic to the nature of capitalism must surely be our primary objective, else all is lost.

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