



Capitalism: the opium of the masses

CONSUMERISM

CHRIS PAVEY wonders what Karl Marx would think about modern lifestyles.

*The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production.*¹

IT IS 4AM IN THE MORNING. I have not slept a heartbeat tonight. I cannot stop thinking constantly of today's happenings, and tomorrow's necessities that will be laid upon me. It is dark, yet soon the sun will rise and it will be one more night that I have not slept. I can hear the lorikeets already beginning their chirping. That is the signal of the beginning of the end for me this evening. This

battle is over. I am defeated. I cannot rid my mind of all its thoughts. The quote by Karl Marx that has been so often used and misused plagues my thoughts: 'It [religion] is the *opium* of the people.'² I cannot help but probe into this further.

The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is the demand for their *real* happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to *give up a condition that requires illusions*. The criticism of religion is, therefore, *in embryo, the*

*criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.*³

Is this what is needed? Criticism? I fall asleep; unexpectedly. Finally there is a silence inside; finally there is peace; finally there is rest; momentarily.

The alarm clock goes off at 6am and it is time for my jog. If I do not jog I will get a sore back during my day at work. If I do not jog I will not be tired enough tonight to sleep. If I do not jog I will not feel good about myself and my life. I will feel depressed, lethargic, a failure. I get up and jog.

It is a bright sunny morning,

and there are many people about already; all dressed and branded. We sweat together in our Nikes, our Reeboks, our Adidas and our Fila. We run to feel good about ourselves, to clear our bodies and minds of all the negative toxins of the day before. Perhaps out of all this struggle and pain there will be momentary peace. But only if we close our eyes to everything that is before us; but only if we do not heed the mobile advertisements, endorsements, distractions and temptations everywhere around us. Do others even see all this around us, or has it become too common to them? I can still see it, but fear others beside me no longer can. *Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again.*⁴

Karl Marx was born in Trier, Germany, on the 5th of May 1818, nearly 200 years ago. He grew up in a city that was in the final death-throes of feudalism. A new capitalist system of relations was slowly taking effect even in this very traditionalist state of Prussia.⁵ Karl Marx's biographer will tell you that Marx had a deep love and interest in history, and it was because of his youth there in this very historical town. Marx's biographer will also tell you that there was great poverty at the time of Marx's youth, and a strong underlying French Revolution-influenced socialist movement developing.⁶ We know, from all that Marx wrote, that he had a desperate and resolute dislike for capitalism. *It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom – free trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.*⁷

I do not know if Marx jogged. I like to think he would have. I like to think it would have helped him cope with his hate. It helps me. Or does it? If Marx was jogging with me now, would all that we see not make him angrier? It does me.

I do not know where my dislike for capitalism came from. But I do know that when I look at the t-shirts, shorts, sports bras and shoes of my fellow joggers, I feel enraged. Worse, I am also wearing these brands; the ones that I sneer at. I am a participant. Worse, I am a participant that does not any longer believe. I am worse than those I jog amongst because of my non-belief! But is there any other way?

*The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.*⁸

I return from my jog to a letterbox filled with the day's 'junk mail' and the weekly free local paper filled with advertisements. I turn on the TV while eating breakfast to watch news sponsored by companies, weather brought to me by a telecommunications supplier, and flickering tickertape messages imploring me to consider new ways of making myself feel good. I flick through the brochures, lingering upon pages and pages of products I would never need, yet the companies intend me to want. What would Marx make of this? I told you so? Was he the kind of man who would gloat? Would he simply stare in wonder, small tears coming to his squinted eyes, a trembling upper lip there hidden beneath that bushy beard of his? I turn to the local paper in desperation, searching for some kind of local news of interest squeezed in there amongst the editorial advertisements. But there is nothing; nothing to cheer my heart and ease my soul. I'm exhausted before it's time to leave for work. Is it from the lack of sleep or the commercialism engulfing me?

I consider calling in sick. I have not called in sick for over a year, despite my inability to sleep in recent months. But if I do not go to work I cannot pay off the home loan. If I do not go to work I cannot pay the ever-increasing electricity and telephone bills. If I do not go to work, I cannot shop for the necessary and unnecessary goods that I want and DON'T need.

I get into my car. I go to work.

Marx coined the term 'commodity fetishism' in 1867, in his book, *Capital*, at the age of 49. It is his explanation for the state of relations within a capitalist society whereby we as human beings deal with one another solely through a commodity determined basis.⁹ Producers and consumers have no direct contact, only having a direct relationship with the actual commodity itself, and therefore acting purely out of self-interest with no regard for the community.¹⁰ I drive my car on a highway congested by traffic full of large five-seater cars the majority of which have only one person in them. What of Marx's arguments, his saint-like status amongst his followers, if he were there driving in the car next to me? Would he steadfastly choose an alternative method of transport, or would he, like myself, and most others around me, choose to forget the fact that by sitting alone as a single entity in a car it disadvantages everyone else. Would Marx push to the back of his mind the knowledge that his car is spewing forth deadly toxins and gases that are busy contributing to changes in our weather and our environment which we have yet to even begin to understand? Would he shrug his shoulders as I do, and ask, 'How else am I going to get to work?'

I read the daily paper at work about an environmental catastrophe in the Ivory Coast city of Abidjan where a global company illegally dumped deadly oil-based toxic rubbish throughout the city because they did not wish to spend the money required to have their European partners clean up the mess. Their lack of concern for the people of the city, some now dying, others breaking out in deadly sores, and more suffering simply from nausea and general illness, is not shocking to me. It is all too common. The paper reports that Africa has long been the dumping ground for Western nations wanting to get rid of their waste cheaply. What surprises me, what saddens me, however, is the knowledge that those who drove the trucks and dumped the waste

I do not know if Marx jogged. I like to think he would have. I like to think it would have helped him cope with his hate. It helps me. Or does it? If Marx was jogging with me now, would all that we see not make him angrier? It does me.

were local people. I question aloud how they could so callously hurt others within their own local community for a buck.¹¹

*It [the bourgeois] has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors', and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment'.*¹²

I start my work answering calls, as I do everyday all day. I take calls for my company, and sell its products. The customers do not know me, and I do not know them. We talk, at first, in a language none of us understand, about filters and megabytes, modems and kilobytes per second, but then we move on to money. This is a language we can all understand. For their cash, I sell these customers what they want and need. I sell my time and knowledge to them for my company's cash. My company sells me and my knowledge to its customers for their cash, and somehow, we all understand, and in theory, end up happy: happy that is, so long as we continue to believe.

And if we do not any longer believe? Is there any other way to interrelate with our fellow human beings if we do not believe? How would Marx cope with this? How else am I to exist in this society? The company, the employee, and the customer all interrelate through money. Worse, our whole society interrelates through money.

*The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production and with them the whole relations of society.*¹³

There is no longer, in the world, such a fear, or resentment, of

capitalism as there once was in Marx's day. And the shackles that were originally put around it, to try to humanise it, have long since been broken apart. Capitalism has been embraced as the new social structure; the new religion. It is OK for sports stars to shamelessly promote themselves and their endorsed products on TV. It does not surprise us to hear that the new rugby team on the Gold Coast is not simply called The Gold Coast Titans, but instead, The Jetstar Gold Coast Titans. It has long become the norm for us to refer to the Sydney Olympic Stadium as Telstra Stadium. It is not even surprising to us to hear that an Australian mining company wishes to mine the Kokoda Trail into oblivion for the gold that lies beneath it. Papua New Guinea has a right to sell itself just as much as any individual person. And we must not forget Marx's warning: *It [capitalism] compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image.*¹⁴

Capitalism is the dominant religion of the 21st century, and I am an infidel, living in the midst of it. I participate. I buy a house; I buy a car. I fall into so much debt that it will require a lifetime of selling my labour to pay for it; a lifetime of submission. I stop sleeping at night.

If Marx's communist solution failed so miserably, then how can I even begin to think I will find one? I am alone in the dark, only Marx, again, is here with me, and through his words, my conscience is

screaming. Are there others like me? Can there be any hope? I choose to no longer submit quietly to something I do not believe in. I start calling the Sydney Olympic Stadium by its original name, hoping others will join me. I stop purchasing products endorsed by athletes. I talk to my customers more; about their likes and dislikes; about their worries and fears. I quit jogging for swimming. I write a paper criticising capitalism, heeding Marx's own words:

*Criticism... pluck[s] the imaginary flowers on the chain not in order that man shall continue to bear that chain without fantasy or consolation, but so that he shall throw off the chain and pluck the living flower. The criticism of religion disillusions man, so that he will think, act, and fashion his reality like a man who has discarded his illusions and regained his senses...*¹⁵

Chris Pavey has completed a Bachelor of Arts (Hon.) at Monash University and is currently undertaking a Masters in Freelance Writing at the University of Canberra.

FOOTNOTES

1. Karl Marx, and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, trans. Dutt, C., Lough, W., and Magill, C. P., (Lawrence & Wishart, 1965), p 60.
2. Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opium_of_the_people
3. Karl Marx, 'Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right', in, *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, (February 1844), published on the web at, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>
4. *Ibid.*
5. David McLellan, *Karl Marx: His life and Thought*, (McMillan, London, 1973), pp 1-2.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Karl Marx, and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 1888 edition, in David Fernbach ed. *The revolutions of 1848* p. 70
8. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
9. Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commodity_fetishism
10. *Ibid.*
11. Lydia Polgreen, and Marlise Simons, 'Global Sludge Ends in Tragedy for Ivory Coast', in. *The New York Times*, (October 2nd 2006). <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/02/world/africa/02Ivory.html?pagewanted=1&r=1&th&emc=th>, pp 1-3.
12. Marx, and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, p. 70
13. *Ibid.*, p. 70
14. *Ibid.*, p. 71
15. Karl Marx, 'Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right', <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>