

SUMMARY

THE PLACEMENT OF HUMAN CONSUMPTION WITHIN CRITICAL ECONOMIC THEORY

1.

In this essay I will endeavour to analyse human consumption under capitalism, and such within the context of critical economic theory. Historically, the question of consumption proper by individuals and individual households has been severally neglected by economic theoreticians, including by theoreticians belonging to the school of Marxists. Yet anno 2006 there is not the slightest doubt that the task of theorising individual capitalist consumption has long be overdue. This is for instance well illustrated by the fact that massive amounts of electronic items, which Northern consumers dispose of, today are being exported towards countries of the South, to be dismantled so as to facilitate the re-use of metal parts, while toxic parts are dumped onto nature. Since such exports would be unthinkable but for the continued existence of extremely unequal relations between North and South within the world economy, - individual consumption, at least as happening in Northern economies, today has become a question that needs to be analysed within the framework of theories on imperialism.

2.

How to initiate the discussion on human consumption and its consequences for humans and for the nature that surrounds us? First, the incorporation of the issue of human consumption into critical economic theory may start from conceptualisation of the existence of a *parallel*. Classical Marxism had always posed that the primary field for analysis is capitalist production, and not the individual consumption by dispersed actors that follows on completion of the process of production. Yet Marxism had also depicted capitalist manufacturing itself as a process of consumption, namely the consumption of means of production (**MP**) and human labouring strength (**L**), taking place where-ever entrepreneurs seek to construct or manufacture new commodities. The first step towards a comprehensive analysis of consumption under capitalism, is to admit that in fact the process of capital accumulation entails two forms of consumption, i.e. the consumption of **MP** and **L** in the course of manufacturing ... **P** ... , and consumption proper, i.e. the consumption of commodities by individuals that follows upon completion of the production process.

3.

The next step, in my view, is to devise a specific formula aimed at visualising capitalist consumption proper. This step can easily be taken on the basis of the admission of analogy, as done just now. Presuming that capitalist consumption, like pre-capitalist consumption, involves the active use by citizens of commodities purchased on the market, - this form of consumption should be distinguished from, yet shows some similarities, with the consumption of commodities taking place in the course of capitalist manufacturing. In both cases, the use of commodities towards a particular human end follows the act of purchasing those commodities. And although the metamorphoses taking place in consequence of these two types of consumption are highly differentiated, even opposite in character, metamorphoses do take place in each case. Hence, it is justified to pose the analogy between consumption in the course of manufacturing, i.e. **C ... P ... C'**, which consumption of commodities results in commodities with added value, - and consumption proper, i.e. **C'... U ... W**, which consumption results in waste, in non-commodity waste.

4.

Further, the trajectory of human consumption under capitalism is not an isolated trajectory, but a trajectory that is fully intertwined with the trajectory of capitalist production. The latter trajectory, to recall, is a trajectory that was characterized by Karl Marx as a series of metamorphoses, as three metamorphoses, each of which he identified through distinct letter codes. The first metamorphosis was one involving the transformation of money capital **M** into commodity capital **C**, the second metamorphosis was the one heralding the consumption of commodities **C** in the course of manufacturing ... **P** ... and resulting in **C'**, whereas the third metamorphosis involved the retransformation of the commodity with added value **C'** into money capital with added value **M'**. Compared to this trajectory of production, the trajectory of consumption proper consists of only one single transformation, being a transformation of a commodity with added value **C'** into a consumed commodity, being a form of non-commodity waste **W**. Contrary to capitalist production, capitalist consumption is a much shorter trajectory, a trajectory which indeed can be depicted through the novel, but quite simple formula **C'... U ... W**.

5.

What is very crucial to recognize also – even if the given differentiation between trajectories is essential – , is that the trajectory of capitalist production and the trajectory of capitalist consumption are closely intertwined trajectories. For the trajectory **C' ... U ... W** and the trajectory **M – C .. P ... C' - M'** should not be seen as disconnected metamorphoses. In fact, the former is the continuation of **C'**'s trajectory after its production under the second mentioned trajectory. In fact, then, these trajectories can also be depicted as part of one single whole, being the full chain of capitalist production and consumption. And in order to depict reality thus, we need to see **C'** not as the precursor of **M'**, but as the peak moment leading from capitalist production to capitalist consumption. In consequence, it is possible to depict a series of transformations which explicitly interconnects production and consumption; a series, which just like Marx's original series consists of *three* metamorphoses, being the metamorphosis **M** into **C**, the metamorphosis **C ... P ... C'**, and the metamorphosis **C'... U ... W**. This combined formula for capitalist production/consumption then becomes **M – C ... P ... C'... U ... W**.

6.

The implications of the above re-conceptualisation, of my proposal to incorporate human consumption into Marxian theory, are farsighted indeed. Under classical Marxian theory, the outcome of capitalist production was defined in the manner in which capitalist owners prefer to see the outcome, i.e. the outcome in terms of capital with added value **M'**. However, once we depict the processes of capitalist production and capitalist consumption as interconnected processes, it soon becomes obvious that the outcome of the process is quite different, if considered from the standpoint of nature, of human health and the health of our natural environment. For the outcome of the trajectory that includes both capitalist production and capitalist consumption is **W**, being non-commodity waste, destined either for final disposal, or destined to be recycled. In either case, the 'owners' of **W** have to count with the fact that non-commodity waste, whether being *E-waste* or any other former commodity, frequently incorporates hazardous materials. Hence, whereas the outcome of production from the standpoint of the capitalist may be added value, - from the standpoint of nature the outcome may be otherwise.

7.

The above can be further underlined by juxtaposing two formulas, each involving three metamorphoses. The first formula is the formula which Marx had originally proposed, i.e. the formula highlighting, as he saw it, the essential character of capitalist production, being represented by three consecutive metamorphoses, the formula $M - C \dots P \dots C' - M'$. This formula has unquestioningly been upheld as scientific formula by several generations of Marxian economists. The second formula, which does not exist in classical textbooks, but which is a crucial novel formula with equally large scientific significance, is the formula $M - C \dots P \dots C' \dots U \dots W$. This formula too reflects the occurrence of three consecutive metamorphoses. However, contrary to the first mentioned formula, this formula reflects the combination of capitalist production and capitalist consumption. Most importantly: whereas the first mentioned formula entirely glossed over the consequences of the existence of C' for our natural surroundings, - the second mentioned formula does express the fact that capitalist production, the very production of added value s , 'in the end' does effect human health and our natural surroundings.

8.

Moreover, it should be realized that the effects of human consumption for our natural surroundings are not just a question that needs to be considered at the level of the commodity each of us individually consumes. For in fact, the formula depicting the chain of capitalist production and capitalist consumption, as presented so far, is in fact an imperfect formula. Since the commodity product churned out via the capitalist manufacturing process is not sold to one individual consumer, but to a whole range of market actors who each buy a small portion of the commodities represented by C' , - capitalist consumption in fact consists in a whole series of parallel trajectories, each being cases of the metamorphosis of C' into W via $\dots U \dots$. Hence, in order to be precise, it is better to depict the chain of capitalist production and consumption as a chain starting with two singular metamorphoses, to be followed by a number of parallel metamorphoses. The further refined formula then is the formula $M - C \dots P \dots C' (1) \dots U \dots W / C' (2) \dots U \dots W / C' (3) \dots U \dots W$.

9.

Let me conclude with a note on the insufficiency of classical economic theory. Both classical 'bourgeois' economic theory and Marxian theory argued that the purpose of capitalist production is the expansion of human consumption on an ever wider scale. Much theorising, in consequence, in the past has focused on the need for human consumption to continually grow, in order to make capitalist accumulation succeed. Thus, under Keynesian theory, the interests of capitalist in the growth of workers' consumption was explicitly recognized. Unfortunately, neither classical 'bourgeois' thinking nor classical Marxist thinking cared to reflect on the implications of ever expanding consumption under capitalism for our natural surroundings. In this brief essay I have tried to demonstrate the urgent need to expand the horizon of economic theory. At the same time, I have also endeavoured to bring out that the development of economic science can well be achieved by reflecting creatively on concepts, letter codes and formulas, designed within the context of classical Marxian theory. The issue of human consumption under capitalist needs to be projected as a continuum of capitalist manufacturing. By redesigning Marx's classical formula for the individual circuit of money capital, the conceptualisation of capitalist consumption proper can well be achieved.

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