

The “civilising influence of capital”



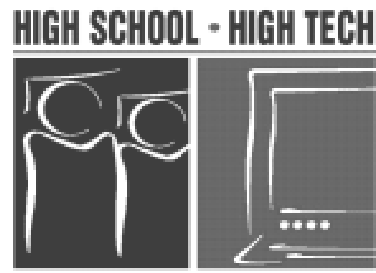
“ The production of relative surplus value, i.e. production of surplus value based on the increase and development of the productive forces, requires the production of new consumption... creation of new needs by propagating existing ones in a wide circle... production of new needs and discovery and creation of new use values...

[Thus] the cultivation of all the qualities of the social human being... is likewise a condition of production founded on capital....

Just as production founded on capital creates universal industriousness on one side... so does it create on the other side a system of general exploitation of the natural and human qualities... while there appears nothing higher in itself, nothing legitimate for itself, outside this circle of social production and exchange...

Hence the great civilising influence of capital; its production of a stage of society in comparison to which all earlier ones appear as mere local developments of humanity and as nature-idolatry...

Capital drives beyond national barriers and prejudices as much as beyond nature worship, as well as all traditional, confined, complacent, encrusted satisfactions of present needs, and reproductions of old ways of life. It is destructive towards all of this, and constantly revolutionises it”



“ The great historic quality of capital is to create this surplus labour, superfluous labour from the standpoint of mere use value, mere subsistence; and its historic destiny [Bestimmung] is fulfilled as soon as...

on one side, there has been such a development of needs that surplus labour above and beyond necessity has itself become a general need arising out of individual needs themselves...

and, on the other side, when the severe discipline of capital, acting on succeeding generations, has developed general industriousness as the general property of the new species...

and, finally, when the productive powers of labour, which capital incessantly whips onward with its unlimited mania for wealth, have flourished to the stage where the possession and preservation of general wealth require a lesser labour time of society as a whole, and where the labouring society relates scientifically to the process of its progressive reproduction, its reproduction in a constantly greater abundance; hence...

where labour in which a human being does what a thing could do has ceased...

Natural necessity in its direct form has disappeared; because a historically created need has taken the place of the natural one. That is why capital is productive; i.e. an essential relation for the development of the social productive forces.”

“ It is the bad side that produces the movement which makes history, by providing a struggle... The production relations in which the bourgeoisie moves have not a simple, uniform character, but a dual character; that in the selfsame relations in which wealth is produced, poverty is also produced; that in the selfsame relations in which there is a development of the productive forces, there is also a force producing repression; that these relations produce bourgeois wealth — i.e., the wealth of the bourgeois class — only by producing an ever-growing proletariat”. (*Poverty of Philosophy*)

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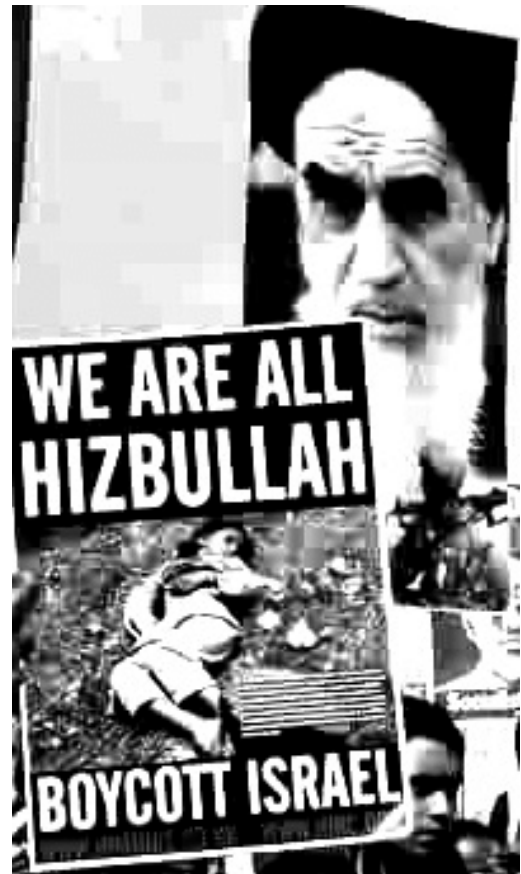
- ❶ Through what processes does capital manifest its “civilising influence”, its “great historic quality”, its “productive” character?
- ❷ What is the difference between Marx’s argument here and the arguments of groups like the Euston Manifesto?
- ❸ Isn’t Marx’s argument here out of date? True, perhaps, in the 1850s, the days of a progressive bourgeoisie, but not for the last 90 years, the era of capitalist decline and decay?

Reactionary anti-capitalism

“ In bourgeois economics - and in the epoch of production to which it corresponds - this complete working-out of the human content appears as a complete emptying-out, this universal objectification as total alienation, and the tearing-down of all limited, one-sided aims as sacrifice of the human end-in-itself to an entirely external end. This is why the childish world of antiquity appears on one side as loftier... In bourgeois economics - and in the epoch of production to which it corresponds - this complete working-out of the human content appears as a complete emptying-out, this universal objectification as total alienation, and the tearing-down of all limited, one-sided aims as sacrifice of the human end-in-itself to an entirely external end. This is why the childish world of antiquity appears on one side as loftier...”

“ It is as ridiculous to yearn for a return to that original fullness as it is to believe that with this complete emptiness history has come to a standstill. The bourgeois viewpoint has never advanced beyond this antithesis between itself and this romantic viewpoint, and therefore the latter will accompany it as legitimate antithesis up to its blessed end.”

“ Reactionary Socialism... Petty-Bourgeois Socialism... In countries where modern civilisation has become fully developed, a new class of petty bourgeois has been formed, fluctuating between proletariat and bourgeoisie, and ever renewing itself as a supplementary part of bourgeois society. This form of Socialism aspires either to restoring the old means of production and of exchange, and with them the old property relations, and the old society, or to cramping the modern means of production and of exchange within the framework of the old property relations that have been, and were bound to be, exploded by those means. In either case, it is both reactionary and Utopian”. (*Communist Manifesto*)



Reactionary anti-capitalism

- ❶ Feudalism did not generate “reactionary anti-feudalism”. Even if the Renaissance was in formal terms an attempt to go back to the past, in substance it was not reactionary. Why does capitalism generate “reactionary anti-capitalism”?
- ❷ Isn't “reactionary anti-capitalism” only a feature of early capitalism, when pre-capitalist classes are still strong?
- ❸ In the early 19th century English workers' movement, a common aspiration was to get back to the conditions “before the Norman Conquest”. Does that mean the workers' movement was reactionary?

Consumerism



“ [The worker] becomes co-participant in general wealth up to the limit of his equivalent -- a quantitative limit which, of course, turns into a qualitative one, as in every exchange. But he is neither bound to particular objects, nor to a particular manner of satisfaction. The sphere of his consumption is not qualitatively restricted, only quantitatively. This distinguishes him from the slave, serf etc... [This] gives [workers] as consumers... an entirely different importance as agents of production from that which they possessed e.g. in antiquity or in the Middle Ages”.

“ The worker's participation in the higher, even cultural satisfactions, the agitation for his own interests, newspaper subscriptions, attending lectures, educating his children, developing his taste etc., his only share of civilization which distinguishes him from the slave, is economically only possible by widening the sphere of his pleasures at the times when business is good, where saving is to a certain degree possible...”

“ In spite of all ‘pious’ speeches [the capitalist] therefore searches for means to spur them on to consumption, to give his wares new charms, to inspire them with new needs by constant chatter etc. It is precisely this side of the relation of capital and labour which is an essential civilizing moment, and on which the historic justification, but also the contemporary power of capital rests”

“ Crude communism is only the culmination of this envy and of this levelling-down proceeding from the *preconceived* minimum. It has a definite, limited standard.

How little this annulment of private property is really an appropriation is in fact proved by the abstract negation of the entire world of culture and civilisation, the regression to the *unnatural* simplicity of the *poor and crude* man who has few needs and who has not only failed to go beyond private property, but has not yet even reached it...

Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it – when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc...

The abolition of private property is therefore the complete emancipation of all human senses and qualities... Just as through the movement of *private property*, of its wealth as well as its poverty – of its material and spiritual wealth and poverty – the budding society finds at hand all the material for this *development*, so *established* society produces man in this entire richness of his being, produces the *rich* man *profoundly endowed with all the senses* – as its enduring reality”.

(1844 Manuscripts)

Consumerism

- ❶ What will socialist “consumerism” look like?
- ❷ How can the vileness of capitalist consumerism be a “civilising moment”?
- ❸ In any case, doesn't consumerism become reactionary when it becomes an ecological threat?

“General intellect”

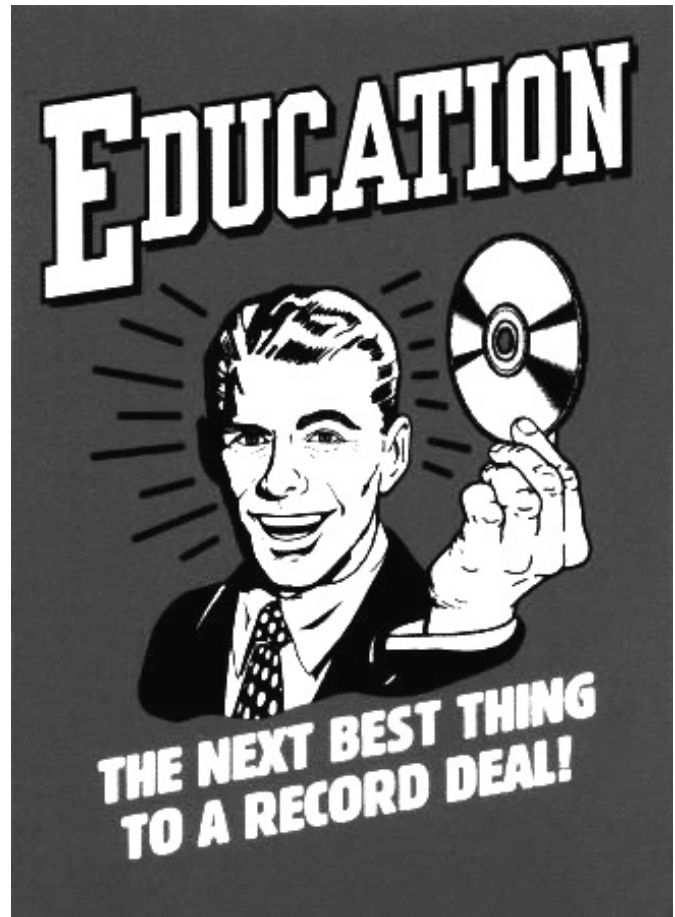
“ The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a direct force of production, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it...

The creation of a large quantity of disposable time apart from necessary labour time for society generally and each of its members (i.e. room for the development of the individuals' full productive forces, hence those of society also), this creation of not-labour time appears in the stage of capital, as of all earlier ones, as not-labour time, free time, for a few...

The mass of workers must themselves appropriate their own surplus labour. Once they have done so – and disposable time thereby ceases to have an antithetical existence... the measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labour time, but rather disposable time”.

“ Labour cannot become play, as [the early socialist] Fourier would like, although it remains his great contribution to have expressed the suspension not of distribution, but of the mode of production itself, in a higher form, as the ultimate object [i.e. he saw communism as transforming production, not just distributing products more equally]. Free time – which is both idle time and time for higher activity – has naturally transformed its possessor into a different subject, and he then enters into the direct production process as this different subject. This process is then both discipline, as regards the human being in the process of becoming; and, at the same time, practice, experimental science, materially creative and objectifying science, as regards the human being who has become, in whose head exists the accumulated knowledge of society...”

“ Modern Industry, by its very nature, therefore necessitates variation of labour, fluency of function, universal mobility of the labourer, on the other hand, in its capitalistic form, it reproduces the old division of labour with its ossified particularisations... This absolute contradiction between the technical necessities of Modern Industry, and the social character inherent in its capitalistic form, dispels all fixity and security in the situation of the labourer... Variation of work at present imposes itself after the manner of an overpowering natural law, and with the blindly destructive action of a natural law that meets with resistance at all points, [but] Modern Industry, on the other hand, through its catastrophes imposes the necessity of recognising, as a fundamental law of production, variation of work, consequently fitness of the labourer for varied work, consequently the greatest possible development of his varied aptitudes...” (Capital vol.1 chapter 25)



“General intellect”

- ❶ Capital constantly “de-skills” particular jobs. Does it “de-skill” the working class as a whole?
- ❷ Capital develops “the general intellect”. But doesn’t it also makes it *not* general — restricting knowledge to those who can pay, or to specialists?
- ❸ No individual can actually have in her or his head the whole of “the accumulated knowledge of society”. What approximation to that development might be possible — and necessary to Marx’s vision of communism?