

Off The cuff

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In praise of luxury

I WATCHED *AMERICAN PSYCHO* again on Boxing Day while stuffing myself with cold organic turkey, cranberry sauce, and a couple of glasses of champagne. The ten-year-old movie brilliantly captures the spirit of Brett Easton Ellis's novel; Mary Harron's screenplay also faithfully reproduces Patrick Bateman's comic mania for products, status, and recognition. It is a mania that leads him to murder without regard to gender or social status. His homicides are conducted with heartless social reasoning, or in lavish settings with sparkingly new high-quality weapons, or with random and gratuitous ease; they fail, however, like the products, which define his life, to provide the meaning or the recognition he craves.

Patrick does not recognise others, nor is he recognised by them. He is not believed, and we are left radically uncertain concerning his state of mind or the scale of his crimes. In fact, it is difficult to ascertain whether any of his crimes have ever strayed beyond his imagination. He is entrapped within a world of products and images hoping that his phantasmagorical and bloody deeds will gain him recognition and secure his release from the society of the spectacle.

The world in which he lives is not only radically unequal, the people he moves amongst on Wall Street in 'mergers and acquisitions' (Or is it 'murders and assassinations?'), are grotesques shaped by a brutal world of heedless consumption in which people without individuality are merely bearers of business cards and semiotic significance.

In this, Brett Easton Ellis and Mary Harron have caught the anti-capitalist mood with rather more humour than Naomi Klein, more *elan* than Noam

Chomsky; and, they have achieved this without the squealing and high-pitched huff and puff that we have come to associate with the Australian Conscience at Large, John Pilger. The proposition is that modern capitalism with its luxury, its mass consumption . . . its material incontinence, and its deracinated bourgeoisie, denies us all meaning, personality, and recognition, because it destroys creativity, community, and access to meaningful labour, and leads us inexorably to psychosis, and to murder on the grand scale.

There is a superficial truth to this. Eighty per cent of the people in the world – more than 5 billion people – live on less than \$10 a day; more than 3 billion of these (or half of the world's population) live on less than \$2 a day. A billion people cannot read or write, 1.6 billion people have no access to electricity, and every day eight hundred million people go hungry. One could easily go on for pages reeling off these dehumanising statistics with ever more detailed permutations of global misery while the fortunate 1.4 billion carry on feasting on seventy-five per cent of the world's wealth.

The world is a radically unequal place in which only one in five of the population is adequately fed, housed or educated. The anti-capitalists lay all this misery at the door of capitalism and imagine a world in which plutocrats contrive to sustain their world dominion without regard to the bloody consequences of their rule. The simpler folk among the radicals imagine a process of redistribution in which the world's wealth is more equitably distributed, while the more sophisticated posit the possibility of another world order in which production for need would take precedence over the drive for profit; it would be a world in which the needs of the many would always trump the profits of the few.

Both of these visions, the simpler one, and the more sophisticated one, rest upon the same two assumptions. Firstly, that capitalism is the cause of poverty and inequality, and secondly, that determining what we need is a fairly straightforward matter. I will do

no more than glance at the first proposition because, of course, we have had inequality, poverty, exploitation, and warfare since the dawn of time, certainly for millennia before the advent of capitalism; indeed it is only since the advent of modern capitalism that it has been possible to even dream, this side of Christ's Second Coming, of a world without poverty. Paradoxically it is only capitalism's vast productive capacity, which has made the slogan and the idea of "Making Poverty History" conceivable – nobody believed in such a thing before the first industrial revolution.

However, the problem of determining the meaning of "need" is a more elusive problem. Karl Marx wanted to inscribe on the banners of communist society the slogan "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs". In using this formulation in 1875 in *The Critique of the Gotha Programme* Marx was, of course, merely echoing the ideas of Saint Simon and the earliest exponents of socialism. Lenin and Trotsky, men of a decidedly more practical bent, subtly adapted the slogan by changing the word "needs" to "work", thus ensuring that it was the practical contribution which individuals make towards the social treasury that should determine their entitlement to a share of the earth's bounty.

But all this skirts around the problem. My radical and revolutionary students frequently tell me that people need housing, food, and clothing: period! However, when challenged as to the quality and quantity of these goods beyond some biologically defined minimum they become decidedly vague. They are good socialists in that they are opposed to both waste and luxury, but they are unable to tell me what I "need", and they appear to be radically uncertain about whether they need their iPhones and the other paraphernalia considered essential by well-heeled young people in the prosperous West.

But this does not stop them from yearning for a world without luxury and inequality. They have somehow managed to move beyond the Mao suit, the grisly uniformity, and the poverty of "common sharing",

into the sunny uplands of an egalitarian and democratic society of the future in which all will happily share the hard labour and meagre rations on offer. They are able to do this because they have little or no experience of poverty and of the damage that poverty does to the prospects of social harmony and human solidarity.

Marx, on the other hand, knew full well that communism was only conceivable upon the basis of abundance. He evidently did not bother to think very much about what he meant by “need”, but he did know that you could not determine “need” in the communist future without undreamed of levels of prosperity. Clearly, this was a futurity in which the cornucopia of communist production would dissolve the distinction between “need” and “luxury”.

Until then, we cannot live without luxury. We cannot live without art, without literature, without drama and poetry, without fine jewellery, Persian rugs and hand-made furniture, without *haut couture*, without champagne, or without philosophy. Excellence in material production, in cheese, in poetry, or in reflection upon the nature of truth, is essential for the progress and development of human society. Without luxury in thought and manufacture and consumption we would be without a scale to measure the quality of anything. The fact that most people on the planet survive with insufficient food and without access to clean drinking water is not a relevant consideration when considering the necessity of luxury.

The abolition of luxury production would not make one jot of difference to the impoverished billions of people on the planet. The closure of opera houses worldwide, the trashing of every Louis Vuitton outlet on the planet, the ploughing up of all the vineyards in Bordeaux, and forcing all the world’s metaphysicians into the ranks of the working class in order to perform “useful work” would make no contribution to human happiness. It would however, impoverish human culture, and make the development of art, science, and technology considerably more difficult.