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**NOTES ON MATERIALISM AND BOREDOM  
- WESTERN DEVELOPMENT IDEALS**

by  
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Georg Sørensen

NOTES ON MATERIALISM AND BOREDOM - WESTERN DEVELOPMENT IDEALS

The classical economists - and indeed some of their predecessors and many of their successors - all stressed the virtues of a division of labour, in society at large and in the single production unit. Division of labour would open the road to an immense expansion in society's production of goods. Some economists had second thoughts about the negative effects of a division of labour - for example, Stuart Mill stressed the drawbacks of labour being hooked to one or very few operations through long working days. In the end, however, the visions of Marx and later Marshall prevailed:<sup>1</sup> operations reduced to rather simple routines tended to be taken over by machinery.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the industrialized West quickly passed through the crude division of labour portrayed in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*. But division of labour is of course still with us, if not in the sense of labour being reduced to appendixes to machines, performing simple operations, then in a wider sense of specialization in society. Production of goods is divided among units specializing in single or a few production lines (I am not talking about structures of ownership, which may eventually be rather concentrated, but about the physical specialization of production), and both blue- and white-collar labourers are experts in certain, often rather limited fields of activity.

We owe to this division of labour, without doubt, our next to limitless capacity for producing gigantic heaps of goods, of material satisfiers of all sorts. We also owe to it the single-mindedness of our lives: the opportunity to strive towards excellence in a very narrow field of activity - be it advertising or aero-engineering, ballet or buck-shooting - is also a kind of jail, fencing you in relation to other types of activity and in many cases ending up making you unable to do anything but your speciality.

The glue that ties all this together is of course the prime measure and goal of each individual activity: the production of exchange value, money being the pure form of exchange value. We thus have a common denominator capable of telling whether any one of us is a success or not, in the pursuit of his or her speciality: how much exchange value is it able to produce, to which amount of money is it equivalent?

In that way, money is the name of the game. There does not even have to be any material activity behind it: in a number of cases, money may come from inheritance or other sorts of coincidence - it does not matter; as long as you are capable of putting "sufficient" (the exact quantity is historically determined of course) money up front you are an instant success in our world.

Conversely, the problems of the unemployed do not primarily stem from the fact that they are unemployed, but from the lack of exchange value that most often accompanies unemployment.. The millionaire on his yacht, mooring in Monte Carlo, may also be unemployed, but that is the kind of unemployment sought after and dreamed of in our world.

Division of labour leads to urbanization, both for the sake of mass markets and for the sake of specialized production involving economies of scale and external economies. Urbanization in turn further increases division of labour: not only is there a singleminded devotion to a narrow field of activity, there is often also several hours of daily commuting time to be able to perform that activity. And in the other end, the exhaustion produced during all this (in addition to the exchange value earned), creates the need for restaurants to cook our food (if it is not TV-dinners), nurses to take care of our children, cleaners to clean our houses, gardeners to tend the garden, etc. The list may be extended to the limit of your exchange value capacity.

In this kind of life, the division between working time and non-working time is not where we think it is. Leaving work does not mark the beginning of non-working time. First, you have to commute back home, and second, you have to recuperate to be able to work the next day. The situation has been described succinctly by Samir Amin: "At the same time, so-called private space is fraud; it is space organized for recuperation, therefore dominated by the demands of society. Individual houses are dormitories, places where men sink into the necessary state of stupor (think of the functions of television), places where they make a feeble attempt to withdraw into themselves (think of the "quiet joys of family life"), places where they are bored."<sup>3</sup> Boredom, as you well know, was only "invented", when the division was made between working and non-working time.

I submit that there are two main pillars of what we in the industrialized West consider a "Good Life": Firstly a high capability of material consumption, a high level of material comfort. This requires a lot of work in a labour-divisioned structure, in order to be able to produce all the goods that the "Good Life" demands on the one hand, and in order to be able to earn the necessary money to buy the goods with on the other. Secondly, a high capacity for non-working time, or if you will, the right to be bored.

According to some observers of affluent life in the United States, the two pillars seem to correlate quite neatly: The higher degree of material affluence, the higher degree of emptiness in life, of boredom.<sup>4</sup> The ultimate novel regarding boredom is the Dice Man,<sup>5</sup> where a bored psychiatrist and his bored patients escape the monotony of their lives by making dice decisions - living according to the "orders" given by the throw of dice.

In this way, materialism and boredom are the two main pillars of our "Good Life"-conception in the industrialized West. Formulated in this manner, it may not sound as a too attractive

way of life, and it may be difficult to understand its immense appeal to most people in the world. However, it must be remembered that these two pillars are always accompanied by two other elements: the element of success in the eyes of the world and the element of security in life. These two latter elements go a long way in explaining the force of attraction wielded by the Western "Good Life".

I am not implying that everybody in the industrialized West lives according to the above description of the "Good Life". There are individuals and groups of people with different ways of life and different ideals. But even such individuals and groups must struggle hard not to fall under the magic spell of materialism and leisure. Even some of the main contradictions in society are organized, not around pro or con this kind of life, but around the access to be able to live it or not: the "Good Life" is the life of the top dogs, capitalists, managers, professionals and bureaucrats. The underdogs struggle, not to alter this conception of the "Good Life", but to get access to it: their organizations demand a larger share of society's material affluence and a larger share of non-working time, and not much else.<sup>6</sup>

Why do we have this conception of the "Good Life"? Certainly, it is not just the matter of a whim, a style of life and development popular for the time being. It is rooted much deeper, in the very way in which society is organized.

We have a society organized around the prime goal of an ever expanding production of exchange value. This is the material basis for a conception of "Good Life" which gives priority to materialism and boredom. "In the capitalist world, man has lost the direct apprehension of use values. Whether he is enormously rich or in abject poverty, he is only a consumer. That is to say, a social animal whose needs are manufactured with the speed and precision of a machine, according to the demands of profit. More than ever it seems to him that his

own strength, the very strength that enables him to control nature, imposes itself upon him as though it were an outside force. He remains alienated."<sup>7</sup>

As long as this type of organization of society dominates, it will be accompanied by the kind of "Good Life"-version described above. Unfortunately, the planned economies of Eastern Europe have not done much to alter this conception. This is indeed because the basic organization of these societies is moulded in the image of the industrialized West, although there is a superstructure of public ownership of the means of production, and an ideology of equality to the effect that everybody should have access to the "Good Life" as soon as possible. This ideology of redistribution of access is the prime difference between industrialized East and industrialized West, and the main reason that the Eastern Model does not attract most people in the West, is the former's rather poor performance in making progress towards the promised land. Who needs a system that cannot deliver the goods and moreover, does not even allow its citizens to complain about it?<sup>8</sup>

But back to us in the industrialized West. We now come to the issue of exploitation. The style of life towards which we strive is based on exploitation, four types of it:<sup>9</sup>

- a) high productivity (exploitation of self)
- b) exploitation of internal proletariat
- c) exploitation of external proletariat
- d) exploitation of nature

Now, if the exploitation was limited to our own areas, (exploiting ourselves, and exploiting the internal proletariat), we could be left to sort out our own predicament. But this is not so. There is an exploitation of an external proletariat, most recently demonstrated in the tendencies towards a so-called New International Division of Labour, meaning primarily that labourintensive industries are moved to Third World countries, where labour is cheap, willing and abundant. In addition, we



are involved in the exploitation of nature, employing means of production that are unecological (pollution) and which tend to consume more resources than nature is able to provide. We try to export the latter problems also. Thus, the Japanese version of the NIDL involves the "phasing out" of heavy, polluting industries from Japanese soil, moving these industries to Third World countries (primarily in Asia) and leaving Japan with an "upgraded" industrial structure, concentrating on skill- and technology-intensive industries.

In addition to the exploitative side of our life style, there is a destructive side. It has to do with the fact that our societies are organized in a way that makes them very difficult to defend - they are highly vulnerable. The high degree of vulnerability is built into the structures of our society: large and complex units on the one hand, and a degree of division of labour on the other that necessitates a constant flow of supplies between single units, not to mention a significant dependence on import and export-activities.

It is very hard to defend structures like these.<sup>10</sup> It requires gigantic arsenals of military hardware.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, society's capacity to produce goods in general is related to its capacity to produce military hardware. Thus, there is a tendency for the increased production of goods in society to be accompanied by an increased production of military hardware. And as the sophistication of goods in general increases, so does the sophistication of the military hardware.

Similar tendencies seem to be at work in the so-called Newly Industrializing Countries of the Third World: an increased industrial capacity also means an increased production of military hardware.<sup>12</sup>

The most recent and by far most dangerous phase in the development of military technology is nuclear weapons, and the



"refinement" of these weapons seem to involve ever more "realistic scenarios" for their eventual use.<sup>13</sup>

In sum, we have a system of production that is capable of producing goods like no other system before it, but our way of producing requires exploitation, not only internally, but also of other parts of the world. At the same time, our means of production are encircled by ever expanding arsenals of means of destruction, constituting a threat, not only to ourselves, but indeed also to other parts of the world.

Fantastic as it must seem against this background, the large majority of those in the industrialized West who address the development problems of the Third World, have the nerve to recommend this style of development as the solution to the Third World's problems - the nerve to recommend the Western "Good Life" as the goal towards which Third World development should aim.

Who are they - a bunch of alienated dare-devils mixed with apologists of the system? Maybe, but also a number of reasonable and sensible people who see no other alternative solutions to the material needs of the Third World than industrialization in the vein of the West. And who unfortunately and many times unconsciously come to translate the urgent basic material needs of the Third World into something quite different: a recommendation to struggle for the "Good Life" in the vein of the West.

There is little doubt that this unfortunate state of affairs has gone from bad to worse by leaving the problems of underdevelopment to economists, who set out to devise technical solutions to the problem as they define it: one of increasing productivity and growth. On the other hand, they encounter Third World leaders who are susceptible to that line of reasoning: "From the first meeting of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development in 1964 to the Manila meeting in 1979,

Third World leaders have couched their demands in economic terms, both general and specific, and though the original aim of 'catching up with the West' appears to have been tacitly abandoned, their avowed or unavowed objective is still westernization through such devices as technology transfers and accelerated industrialization."<sup>14</sup> Again, there is, of course, nothing wrong with attempts to solve the material need problems of the Third World. The point in this context is merely that doing it in the vein of the West will necessarily tend to create a malaise similar to the one plaguing the West.

And then there is the issue of whether this style of development stretched to most parts of globe is at all physically possible. It has, for example, been estimated that bringing all 4 billion inhabitants of the globe to the current level of material consumption in the United States will require eight times the amount of natural resources currently available.<sup>15</sup> And whom do we have left to exploit should all of us indulge in the "Good Life", which requires a fair amount of precisely that - exploitation?

Doomsday prophecies, you would object. Our system of production and consumption has historically shown a remarkable capacity for adaptation and innovation.

Perhaps, Maybe. Even hopefully. But this capacity for innovation and adaptation has not as yet included dealing with the core problems of the "Good Life": Materialism and boredom. Additionally, there is a tendency for the newer versions of this way of life to be ever more fading and unattractive copies of the ideal: you may still be fascinated by the spell of the Big Apple - New York - but very few people really love Tokyo, and nobody, except those forced by circumstance, would want to spend their life in Sao Paulo.

This situation does not have to leave us in despair, bumping down the same old road. There are, after all, a number of resistance movements in the West to our version of the "Good Life" and to the exigencies of exploitation and threats of destruction that go with it. The strongest of these resistance movements are the peace movement and the movement for a cleaner and healthier environment, whereas those movements really questioning the core basis of the "Good Life" are not nearly as strong: the hippie-movement (almost totally replaced now by a new generation in the punk movement); small factions of the organized political left, and factions of the woman's movement.

While there is no doubt that all kinds of resistance movements will grow stronger as the contradictions involved in the "Good Life" continue to unfold, the movements have so far had trouble in formulating positive and coherent alternatives to the current state of affairs.

Those of us who have profound trouble with the "Good Life" know what we do not want: we do not want a way of life that is based on exploitation and maximum danger of destruction. We do not want a life with an over-supply of material needs (material suffocation) and an undersupply of non-material needs (spiritual starvation).

But that does not tell too much about what we do want, except for the desire for a better mix of the four groups of basic human needs: survival, welfare, freedom and identity.<sup>16</sup>

To be able to formulate more coherent development alternatives there is no shadow of doubt that the resistance movements in the industrialized West need development aid from the Third World. Not in the form of goods, of course, but in form of ideas of ways of life coming from areas where the dominant pattern is not yet materialism and boredom. The hippie movement knew that from the beginning and a similar awareness is growing in the current resistance movements.

This is not a call to scrap the whole system of the industrialized West. After all, we are clever producers with an ability to come up with ingenious technologies capable of solving the material need problem ever more easily and efficiently. But we are on the brink of disaster and we need to remould our basic system. Thus, the call of the day is: support your local resistance movement and look South for inspiration.

January 1984

NOTES

- 1) Cf. Staffan Laestadius: Arbetsdelningens Dynamik (The Dynamics of Division of Labour) - om arbetsdelning, teknisk utveckling och tillväxt i ekonomisk teori, mimeo, Stockholm 1982, ch. 2.
- 2) Although there are large pockets of this kind of work still being left to manual labour, particularly in the Third World.
- 3) Samir Amin: In Praise of Socialism, Monthly Review, September 1974, Vol. 26 No. 4, p. 13.
- 4) Cf. for example the observations in Jakob Holdt: Amerikanske Billeder, København 1977. (American Pictures, english version forthcoming in June 1984).
- 5) Luke Rhinehart (George Cockroft): The Dice Man, Manchester 1971.
- 6) I am thinking of classical working class unions and political parties. There are other organizations, however, as we shall see below.
- 7) Amin, op.cit., p. 7. This whole line of thinking owes much to Herbert Marcuse: One Dimensional Man. Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society, Boston 1968, (1964).
- 8) Cf. Johan Galtung et.al.: Why the Concern with Ways of Life? GPID project, United Nations University, reported in University of Oslo, council for International Development Studies: The Western Development Model and Life Style, Report, Oslo 1980, p. 64.
- 9) The four points are listed ibid., p. 64.
- 10) This line of reasoning is indebted to Johan Galtung and Jan Øberg, cf. the latter's: At udvikle sikkerhed og sikre udvikling (Developing security and securing development), Copenhagen 1983.
- 11) The perceived threat from other powers help, of course to get this whole spiral of armanent going, cf. Fred Halliday: The Making of the Second Cold War, London 1983, ch. 1.
- 12) Again, industrialization alone cannot account for the military buildup: perceived and real threats from internal and external enemies, and perhaps additional pushes from one of the superpowers are also involved.
- 13) Reagan's team holds more than one advisor who believes that a nuclear war with the Soviet Union can be won, cf. Halliday, op.cit., ch. 5.

- 14) Geoffrey Barraclough: Worlds Apart: Untimely Thoughts on Development and Development Strategies, Discussion Paper 152, IDS, Sussex 1980, p. 1.
- 15) Jan Øberg, lecture, Aalborg University, October 25, 1983.
- 16) Cf. Galtung et.al., op.cit., p. 50.

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