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**'Unsocial objects disgraceful to humanity': some ideas of
consumption in British socialist thought**

Inaugural Lecture
of

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'Unsocial objects disgraceful to humanity': some ideas of consumption in British socialist thought

In the lyrical peroration of Crosland's classic, *The future of socialism*, he wrote of the need 'to make Britain a more colourful and civilised country'. 'We need', he argued, 'not only higher exports and old-age pensions, but more open-air cafes, brighter and gayer streets at night, later closing hours for public houses, more local repertory theatres, better and more hospitable hoteliers and restaurateurs, brighter and cleaner eating-houses, more riverside cafés, more pleasure gardens on the Battersea model, more murals and pictures in public places, better designs for furniture and pottery and women's clothes...better-designed street-lights and telephones kiosks, and so on ad infinitum.'¹

This call for what he termed 'liberty and gaiety in *private* life'² was part of Crosland's wider objective of reformulating the political economy of British social democracy to make it relevant both to a period of increasing affluence and one when much of what pre-war British socialists had sought had already been achieved. For, of course, by 1956 when *The future of socialism* was published, the commanding heights of industry had been nationalised; a welfare state had been brought into being and Keynesian demand management *had*, it seemed, banished the evil of mass unemployment forever. Crosland's aim was, therefore, to extend the social democratic agenda to encompass new aspirations; aspirations more appropriate to an age of affluence than those which had driven the policies of austerity pursued by the post-war Attlee governments, as the nation had emerged from the travails of war. His objective too was to declare redundant that Fabian socialist political economy which had informed this post-war conduct of policy; to persuade democratic socialists to jettison a spartan socialism that had prioritised collectivism, administrative efficiency and self-sacrificing social service and that had evinced a profound and heartfelt suspicion of the reckless and ill-informed

¹ C.A.R. Crosland, *The future of socialism*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1956, 522.

² *Ibid*, 521.

private consumer and the whole business of private enjoyment.³ For Crosland this self-denying, bureaucratic socialism had been epitomised by the Webbs, who had admitted, in a piece written in 1932, that 'owing to [their] concentration on research, municipal administration and Fabian propaganda, [they had] neither the time nor the energy, nor yet the means to listen to music and drama, to brood over classic literature, to visit picture galleries, or to view with an informed intelligence the works of architecture.'⁴ They had also confessed, as Crosland was quick to point out, to having spent their honeymoon in fact-collecting visits to trades societies in Dublin. Though one might opine that the fact that they spent it in Dublin does suggest that they were not entirely oblivious to the possibility of gaiety in private life.

Such a self-abnegating socialism was, for Crosland, no longer apposite to an age of growing abundance; if it was apposite to any age at all. 'Now', he wrote, 'the time has come for a reaction; for a greater emphasis on private life, on freedom on beauty, leisure and even frivolity. Total abstinence and a good filing system are not now the right signposts to the socialist Utopia; or, at least, if they are, some of us will fall by the wayside.'⁵

Such passages can be seen, I think, as Crosland's prolegomenon for a democratic socialist political economy of plenty; for a socialism that would enthusiastically embrace the possibilities that a growing material abundance was opening up; a socialism that would celebrate the sphere of private consumption and absolve from the sin of self-indulgence those who eschewed the self-abnegation of Fabians like the Webbs; a socialism that recognised, legitimised and even applauded the materiality of the individual's pursuit of liberty, gaiety and self-fulfilment.

There were of course those killjoys on the Left who, in the 1950s and subsequently, retained a deep suspicion of such a view and what was following in the wake of an

³ On this see, for example, N. Thompson, 'Hobson and the Fabians: two roads to socialism in the 1920s', *History of political economy*, 26, 1994, 203-20.

⁴ Quoted in M. Cole (ed.), *The Webbs and their work*, London, Muller, 1949, 226.

⁵ Crosland, *The future of socialism*, 524.

increasingly rampant consumerism. The work of the Frankfurt School, J.K. Galbraith, Vance Packard and others did not fall on entirely, stony British soil. But Crosland's volume was certainly indicative of the shape of ideological developments to come, as many of the political economies and political economists of British democratic socialism became more sympathetic to the notion of private consumption and more sensitive to the aspirations and voting power of the affluent private consumer.

Illustrative of such a trend was the emergence of what has been termed post-Fordist socialism; a political economy that came to be articulated with a particular vigour and conviction in the 1980s and 1990s by writers such as Paul Hirst in Britain, Charles Sabel and Michael Piore in the United States and John Mathews in Australia and which won over the hearts and minds of a significant section of the British Left intelligentsia.⁶ The essence of this socialism was that its proponents saw in the contemporary demise of what they termed a Fordist regime of production, a regime that they argued had dominated western capitalism for the greater part of the twentieth century, the possibility of socialist progress. Fordism had been characterised by an organisation of production that permitted long runs of standardised products aimed at a mass market. This had involved the application of the principles of Taylorist scientific management to an extended subdivision of labour, together with the utilisation of a dedicated technology requiring an uninterrupted output of basic products for its efficient and profitable application. Such an organisation of the labour process was also one that entailed a strict division between the conception and execution of tasks, necessitating, in consequence, rigidly hierarchic command structures.

For post-Fordist socialists, Fordism had laid the basis for the economic achievements of twentieth-century capitalism. But, as they saw it too, the productivity gains for which it had been responsible had been largely exhausted by the 1970s. Specifically, Taylorism and the progressive subdivision and intensification of the labour process had, they

⁶ See, for example, P. Hirst, *Associative democracy, new forms of economic and social governance*, London, Polity, 1994; J. Mathews, *Tools of change, new technology and the democratization of work*, Sydney, Pluto, 1989; C. Sabel and M. Piore, *The second industrial divide*, New York, Basic Books, 1984.

argued, occasioned the attenuation of initiative and creativity in an alienated workforce; a workforce that was ill-adapted to the innovation and change which an accelerating pace of technological development was demanding. De-skilling, the monotony of repetitive tasks and the hierarchic decision-making structures characteristic of Fordist mass production had also instilled an oppositional mentality in the workforce that had borne fruit in a rising wave of industrial unrest. And, 'when labour [was] too weak to protest openly and collectively, rising rates of health-related absenteeism, early retirement, and increases in chronic illness, disrupt[ed] production and strain[ed] social welfare systems, that provided for the sick and the disabled'.⁷

Also, crucially, in addition to the alienation and demoralisation of the workforce, Fordist mass production was seen as having led, by the 1970s, to a crisis of market saturation for the standardised products it produced. Despite the assiduous creation of material desires by aggressive marketing and advertising, despite the built-in obsolescence of most consumer durables, a state of satiation prevailed. Consumer palates had become jaded with the kind of commodities furnished by Fordist production methods; a desire for the standardised was giving way to a craving for the customised; indiscriminate consumption was yielding to differentiated demand.

But, post-Fordist socialists argued, it was just such causes of the market-saturation crisis of Fordism which were propelling a reinvention of capitalism that would, in turn, create the possibility of a reconfigured and rejuvenated socialism. For what the emergence of customised consumption and differentiated demand was engendering was a new regime, a post-Fordist regime, of production, characterised by what many commentators termed 'flexible specialisation'.

Flexible specialisation was defined as 'a strategy of permanent innovation: an accommodation to ceaseless change, rather than an effort to control it'. It was a strategy 'based on flexible, multi-use equipment, skilled workers and the creation, through politics, of an industrial community that restricted the forms of competition to those

favouring innovation.'⁸ Flexible specialisation was about competition through quality and product differentiation not through paring labour costs and prices. And, it was argued, for these reasons, the spread of flexible specialisation was reviving high-skill, high-value-added, craft forms of production.

Flexible specialisation also entailed the production of 'small or medium rather than large volumes of each part or product'; it involved 'frequent changes in the basics of product design and production methods'; it also permitted 'a product portfolio of several models for the same plant, rather than exclusive concentration on one or a few goods'. And so, crucially, flexible specialisation relied upon 'the greater task versatility, skills and decision-making abilities of production workers because of the frequency of model changes and the irrelevance of detailed Tayloristic controls'.⁹ Post-Fordist socialists believed that flexible specialisation pointed, therefore, to the elimination of divisions between the conception and execution of tasks, it enhanced worker autonomy, it facilitated the implementation of team-working involving task rotation and, more generally, it necessitated the introduction of democratically-determined work practices.

For post-Fordist socialists, firms organised according to flexible specialisation principles had the resilience and, above all, the adaptability necessary to circumvent or meet the challenges which were undermining Fordism. But, in addition, an organisation of production informed by such principles would, at the same time, create possibilities for the pursuit of recognisably socialist objectives. For, with differentiated demand and flexible specialisation, labour became the key asset of modern production. Where Fordism had looked to deskilled automata; flexible specialisation looked to a polyvalent labour force subject to constant retraining and skill enhancement. Where Fordism envisaged a separation between the tasks of conception (the realm of management) and execution (the remit of the workforce), flexible specialisation saw both as located in the

⁸ Sabel and Piore, *The second industrial divide*, 191.

⁹ B. Jones, 'Flexible automation and factory politics: the United Kingdom in comparative perspective' in P. Hirst and J. Zeitlin (eds.), *Reversing industrial decline? : industrial structure and policy in Britain and her competitors*, Oxford, Berg, 1989, 99; on this see also P. Hirst and J. Zeitlin, 'Flexible specialisation vs post-Fordism: theory, evidence and policy implications', *Economy and society*, 20, 1991, 2.

⁷ C. Sabel, *Work and politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982, 199.

same person or persons. The ideal of labour that involved a many-sided craftsmanship and that fused manual dexterity and cognitive power, an ideal to be found in the Marx of the *Philosophical manuscripts*, the Morris of *News from nowhere* and the political economy of the British guild socialists, could now be realised in a post-Fordist world. Post-Fordist socialists looked to the rebirth of the independent artisan, no longer wielding hand held tools but the power of the computer; no longer a figment of utopian nostalgia but surfing the incoming tide of economic history.

And with labour's new status, with its greater autonomy and independence would come the erosion and ultimately the destruction of the hierarchical organisation of Fordist production. For this apotheosis of the independent artisan would entail, indeed demanded, a consensual, co-operative and, some commentators argued, a more participative, democratic approach to enterprise management. Firms organised on the basis of flexible specialisation principles would be characterised by flatter command hierarchies, limited surveillance and supervision and the kind of democratisation of decision-making which would not only instil commitment to organisational goals but would allow enterprises to reap the benefits of expertise freely and creatively given; to reap, in effect, what Lester Thurow, categorised as the 'soft productivity gains' of a co-operative and harmonious working environment.¹⁰ Each workplace could become a Morrisian Kelmscott; a locus of joyful and creative labour. An historic moment had arisen when even short-run economic expediency seemed to be consistent with the application of socialist principles to enterprise management. 'The participative and democratic workplace' was becoming, as post-Fordist socialists saw it, 'the most efficient and productive workplace'.¹¹

In another way too, it was believed, consumer-driven, flexible specialisation opened up possibilities for the democratisation of economic decision-making. For post-Fordists argued that in order to enhance enterprise responsiveness to the evanescent niche

¹⁰ For a discussion of these gains from a socialist perspective see M. Harrington, *Socialism, past and future*, London, Pluto, 1993, 147.

¹¹ J. Mathews, *Age of democracy: the politics of post-Fordism and social form*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1989, xiii.

markets which capitalist producers were increasingly attempting to service, corporations were also looking to decentralise decision-making to ever smaller units of production; a process facilitated by advances in information technology and computer-automated manufacturing. These developments, it was believed, would allow vertically-integrated operations to uncouple their production processes, leading to the emergence of many small, single product or single-function companies, within which democratised decision-making could more easily operate.

Post-Fordist socialists could therefore portray discriminating consumers of customised, high-value-added, quality products as constituting a new revolutionary vanguard, effecting a transformation in the position of labour by demanding goods produced by non-alienated, multi-skilled artisans, in small computer-resourced workshops, characterised by co-operative and democratised decision-making. For such writers it was the discriminating, hedonistic, utility-maximising consumer, not the hardy-handed son of toil, who could be relied upon to precipitate those revolutionary changes in the organisation of production which would lay the basis for a liberated proletariat within a socialist economy and polity. Not only could rich consumers pass through the eye of the needle and enter the New Jerusalem; their activity in the shopping malls of England's green and pleasant land would prove instrumental in its construction. A Benetton Britain would be a socialist Britain and, of course, given the relative attractiveness of Benetton and socialism in the 1980s, this seemed to have certain pleasing implications as regards the popularity of the Left's agenda. Nowhere was the spirit of this new, consumer-driven socialism more fervently welcomed than in the pages of *Marxism Today*, which embraced the ethos of what it termed, with unnerving originality, 'New Times', by launching its own credit card and range of designer products; giving the impression, as John Saville put it at the time, that where you stood on consumption had become the litmus test of the whole issue of socialist renewal'.¹² And, of course, in many respects, by the 1980s and 1990s, it had.

¹² J. Saville, 'Marxism today: an anatomy', *Socialist Register*, 1990, London, Merlin, 1990, 36.

So, for post-Fordist socialists, the workers of the world need no longer unite, they could go shopping instead and the revolution would follow swiftly in the wake of their purchases; the proletariat would storm the barricades with only their credit cards to hand. Joyful, creative labour and customised abundance, who could ask for anything more.

That post-Fordist socialism was conceptually flawed, historically ill-grounded, rested on manifestly shaky empirical foundations and failed to identify the true organisational trajectory of much of late-twentieth-century, western, industrial capitalism are failings that need not detain us here. For its true significance lies, to my mind, not in its substance but in what it signified. For while it may have represented one of the more *avant garde* forms in which democratic socialists sought to embed the instincts and aspirations of the private consumer and private consumption in their political economies, it was, nonetheless, illustrative of a more general, late-twentieth-century, ideological trend. A trend that saw an increasing unpreparedness within the Left to challenge a hegemonic culture of privately-purchased material contentment for fear of the political or, to be more precise, the electoral consequences of so doing; that saw the emergence of a climate of opinion which made many on the Left unwilling to contemplate the possibility of raising personal or corporate direct taxation, even when confronted by the decaying infrastructure of what, in the halcyon days of Keynesian social democracy, had been regarded as *public* services; a trend that saw many on the Left connive at substituting the rhetoric of consumerism and the market for the language of *public service*, promoting the ascendancy of discursive formations in which university students became our customer base, in which modules, like milk were delivered not taught and in which students were no longer educated but imbued with the transferable skills necessary for their marketability as high grade human capital. Though one might add that if what universities did in the 1980s and 1990s was increasingly informed by the language of the free market, their quality control procedures assumed, *pari passu*, some of the hallmarks of Stalinist central planning; with our political masters, in the words of one recent commentator, 'desiring to control what is learnt, and

the ways in which it is learnt, in a manner that would make St. Just blush'. I hasten to add that the commentator was not myself but the Chief Executive Officer of the Arts and Humanities Research Board, in a recent review, in the *Historical Journal*.¹³ What that reviewer did not say, but what I would add, is that even this central planning, in keeping with the discursive commercial spirit of the age, was all too often justified less with reference to producing more educated, rounded, civilised, reflective human beings and more with the avowed object of maximising the output of graduates as marketable commodities; products fit for purpose, fit that is, primarily, for the purposes of potential profitmakers. It is such a discourse and the objectives it informs that have all too rarely been challenged by the Left in the last two decades; for this, economic philosophies such as that of post-Fordism have in no small measure been responsible.

So, faced with a Left, large elements of which have bought into the new consumerism and have been prepared to accept, applaud and even see teleological virtue in the commoditisation of everything, where are those who are uneasy with such developments to look for inspiration. Well rather than returning for enlightenment to the austere, abstemious, collectivist, public-service-driven socialism that Crosland pilloried, I think there might be some profit in considering the socialist political economy of a much earlier period. Because, by many of its denizens, the early nineteenth century was *also* viewed as a period when the rapid expansion of the nation's productive powers was creating the possibility of abundance; and, therefore, creating unparalleled opportunities for consumption and the material transformation of people's lives. As one writer put it in the *Co-operative Magazine* of October 1827, Britain had, in the 1820s, 'passed a boundary never before reached in the history of man; passed the regions of poverty arising from necessity and entered a realm of permanent abundance; attain[ing] the means to ensure the Wealth of Nations, that object so long sought for by legislators and political economists'.¹⁴

So how, then, did early nineteenth century socialists react to their own, imagined, age of

¹³ D Eastwood, Review of S. Collini, *English pasts: essays in history and culture*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, *Historical Journal*, 44, 2001, 1107.

affluence? Well it should be said at the outset that for most its advent was certainly something to be welcomed. As one writer put it, 'in wealth itself, however superabundant, there is nothing injurious.'¹⁵ The mechanisation of industrial processes and the general expansion of productive activity had, as this and other socialist writers saw it, opened up the real possibility of a significant addition to the sum total of human happiness; for they could be made, 'productive of elegance, of taste, or of whatever can gratify the senses'.¹⁶

Yet, what one certainly does *not* have from these writers, is an uncritical celebration of the joys and virtues of individual consumption. As they saw it consumption was not, under existing economic and social arrangements, an unproblematic good. Thus much contemporary consumption was clearly identified by early socialist writers as directed at establishing social distinctions and promoting social differentiation; or, in modern parlance, it was about the purchase of positional goods. As one such writer put it, consumption was about 'drawing a line of distinction between possessors and their fellow creatures'. Consumption created, in the words of the same author, 'a circle of false pride and antipathy, within which sympathy is chilled and friendship destroyed...what immense portions of the necessities of life are abstracted; what time and talent sacrificed for such unsocial objects; objects disgraceful to humanity.'¹⁷ The disgrace of such consumption lay not in the nature of what was consumed; though that might indeed be of a disgraceful nature. The sin was not just the sin of luxury or wasteful consumption; though individualised luxury and waste were certainly sins against the holy ghost of socialism. What made such consumption disgraceful was its unsocial or socially-divisive intent. The desire of the consumer was to provoke envy, to engender antipathy, to confirm social division and to indulge in self-advertisement. What was under critical fire here were the *motives* informing possessive individualism in a competitive capitalist economy and, thence, by implication, an economy founded upon the self-interested pursuit of gain. For Adam Smith, consumption, mediated by the

¹⁴ *Co-operative Magazine*, 2 October 1827, 436.

¹⁵ Anon., *An essay in answer to the question*, London, 1834, 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

market, was a socially-integrative activity. It brought together buyers and sellers; it matched need with the capacity to supply; it reinforced social interdependence. But for socialist writers, in a competitive context, beyond the satisfaction of basic needs, consumption was always likely to be fundamentally divisive.

There was, of course, much in the early-nineteenth-century socialist writing on consumption that did focus on the substance of what was consumed and much of this undoubtedly came by many and devious roots from the work of William Godwin and was inspired, directly or indirectly, by the eighteenth-century civic republican critique of the moral, social and political degeneracy induced by luxury. Thus for many early socialists, luxury consumption produced effeminacy; it 'bred oppressive and disturbing vices'; it was productive of 'infirmity of body and mind'; it was the cause and consequence of idleness and it induced intellectual atrophy, both on the part of the sybaritic rich and on the part of those whose consequent impoverishment denied them the means of education. As one writer put it, 'the mental power of mankind is destroyed in one case by luxury and frivolous pursuits and in the other by *want*'.¹⁸

As regards intellectual atrophy, many socialist writers also made the more general point that the obsessive focus on the acquisition and consumption of commodities, that characterised contemporary society, necessarily resulted in a consequent deprioritisation of intellectual endeavour and intellectual achievement. In such a society, as one writer had it, the mind would be 'starved to support the body'. 'Any system', he wrote, 'which places honour, and all that men hold estimable, on the possession of *wealth*, must have the effect of withdrawing all attention from the mind which is consequently enervated, and if not destroyed, prostituted to the most unworthy purposes.'¹⁹

The untrammelled pursuit of material consumption was, such writers believed, an *ignis*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 46; Anon., *Community of Icarie*, London, 1847, 2; J. Hamilton, *Owenism rendered consistent with our civil and religious institutions*, London 1825, 9.

¹⁹ Anon., *An essay*, 12.

fatuus. 'We should not', as one put it, 'permit our minds to become engrossed in the pursuit of wealth, or infatuated by the vanity and ambition of the world.'²⁰ To do so obfuscated the true sources of happiness. In particular, as many saw it, the obsessive pursuit of the material concealed the qualitative superiority of intellectual pleasures; 'intellectual pleasures which', as one writer viewed it, 'were ill exchanged for all that wealth or pomp bestow'.²¹ Consumption should always be seen, therefore, as a means to an end, the end of self-development, it should not be seen as an end in itself.

Material impoverishment was certainly an evil, not only because it threatened the separation of body and mind but also because, as one writer put it, want 'debars the individual so situated from mental improvement'.²² But, for all that, these writers were clear that real material needs once satisfied should not be replaced by artificial or induced wants; that road might lead to sensual gratification but also, ultimately, to intellectual and moral degradation.

The multiplication of such wants also served to debase humanity, or at least the labouring part of humanity, in another way; one that had been highlighted in particular by William Godwin. Thus with reference to the proliferation of what he termed 'adventitious wants', Godwin wrote in *The Enquirer*, in 1797, that 'every man who invents a new luxury adds so much to the quantity of labour entailed on the lower orders of society. The same may be affirmed of every man who adds a new dish to his table...Every new luxury is a new weight thrown into the scale. The poor are scarcely ever benefited by this. It adds a new portion to the mass of their labour; but it adds nothing to their conveniences... If a rich man employ the poor in breaking up land, and cultivating its useful productions, he may be their benefactor. But if he employ them in erecting palaces...in laying out his parks, and modelling his pleasure grounds, he will be found, when rightly considered, their enemy. He is adding to the weight of oppression, and the vast accumulation of labour by which they are already sunk beneath the level of

²⁰ Anon., *Elements of the principles best calculated to heal the woes of mankind*, published by the Christian Co-operative Community Society, Cheltenham, n.d., 10.

²¹ Anon., *An essay*, 4.

²² *Ibid*, 7.

the brutes. His mistaken munificence spreads its baneful effects on every side; and he is entailing curses on men he never saw, and posterity yet unborn.²³

And, like Godwin, early-nineteenth-century socialist writers were also alive to these burdens; they were alive to the social disutilities and the human costs that multiplying material demands could impose. Their argument too was that given existing economic arrangements and the existing distribution of wealth there was, more often than not, a fundamental mismatch between the utility of individual consumption and the individual and social disutility of the incessant backbreaking, mind-atrophying labour it demanded. In addition they stressed that the desire of the rich to consume their luxuries at the lowest possible price induced the adoption of work practices, in particular the division of labour, better suited to automata than rational beings. Of course, as to this latter point, the intellectual atrophy induced by the division of labour, socialist writers were more often indebted to Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, as many acknowledged, than to the works of William Godwin.²⁴

So how then should consumption be dealt with in the context of a socialist community or commonwealth? How would and could the dangers and evils of consumption that were all too apparent in the old, immoral world be elided? There is here, in some of the socialist literature of the early-nineteenth-century period a distinctly ascetic vein; this is a literature that emphasised frugality and the strict limitation of desire. Such a view is apparent, for example, in a pamphlet of the Ham Common Concordists who sought to establish a co-operative community on Ham Common, in Surrey, in the early 1840s. As their Prospectus, published in 1841, put it, 'custom having burthened us with a multitude of artificial wants, it will be the business of the members to divest themselves of all those to which they have been subject. Economy, no less than the conditions for the development of man's highest nature, calls for the utmost simplicity in food, raiment, furniture, dwellings and other outward means and so the inmates on all occasions must endeavour assiduously to reduce the number of their adventitious wants. Their drink will

²³ Wm. Godwin, 'Of riches and poverty', *The Enquirer, reflections on education, manners and literature*, London, 1797, 177-78.

be water and their food vegetables and fruits, and they will eat their food chiefly uncooked by fire...their clothing will be that best adapted to man, without reference to fashion and caprice; and of one common texture. According to variety in unity, however, it may be different in shape and colour for age and sex.²⁵ Communitarians would 'sleep on mattresses without down or feathers, and they will rise and retire early.' As to 'personal ablutions', these would, 'be done completely, healthfully, and joyously by means of a shower or plunging bath direct from a pure spring.' And as to food, all would 'eat from one board, spread with due regard to simplicity and purity.' Concordists would in the words of their Prospectus (and in the best traditions of Oxford and Cambridge colleges) 'enjoy simple meals that leave the intellect clear'.²⁶ However, the Ham Common Concordists were exceptional in the degree of asceticism they preached. Most early nineteenth century socialist writers eschewed such extremes of frugality and self-denial. Most, indeed, had no problem with the prospect of opulence or, at least, communal opulence.

In the imagined community of one socialist writer, for example, food would, 'be skilfully prepared so as to adapt itself to the tastes and constitutions of the several members. A variety of different kinds of food will of course be prepared every day, from which every individual may select that which is most agreeable. We are not yet philosophers enough to despise this advantage; and we confess we anticipate solid gratification from sitting down every day with our families to an abundant board of the best provisions, well cooked, and affording a variety of good cheer, which will more than realize the happy days of the roast beef of Old England.'²⁷ Here, unusually, communitarian socialist aspirations are fused with a language of nostalgia more characteristic of Cobbettian political radicalism than the socialist political economies of the period. But, that aside, the message is clear: the consumption of flesh, not its mortification, was what was wanted.

²⁴ See for example, Charles Hall, *The effects of civilisation*, London, 1805, 22-26.

²⁵ Anon., *A prospectus for the establishment of a Concordium*, London, 1841, 5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁷ Anon., *Report of the committee appointed at a meeting of journeymen, chiefly printers*, London, 1821, 21.

The objective of most communitarian socialists was not so much to constrain as to educate desire; an education that would necessarily result in the eradication of what were seen as artificial and adventitious wants and, in particular, the elimination of the demand for positional goods. And this, it was believed, would, above all else, lay the basis for ending what they termed *unnecessary* labour; labour that, under existing arrangements, was given over to the production of the pernicious and the useless; given over to the production of those 'unsocial objects disgraceful to humanity' whose condemnation has already been noted.

With the elimination of unnecessary labour would come many things but, in particular, the possibility of leisure and recreation; or, more accurately, rational recreation. For this is how many early socialists envisaged the future growth of private consumption in the context of their commonwealths and communities; they saw it in terms of the increasing consumption of the free time that a rapidly expanding capacity to produce would create. Rational recreation was to be *the* most important form in which individuals would set about, as one writer phrased it, 'the right enjoyment of riches'.²⁸ And this particular 'right enjoyment of riches' was to be one of the main ways in which the opulence of the community would be employed and enjoyed.

A commitment to it was to be built into the very physical infrastructure and even the topography of the communities that some socialist writers imaginatively constructed. Thus in a *Description of an architectural model for a community*, published in 1830, mention is made of the community's 'quadrangle...[being] laid out in shrubberies, flower gardens, and pleasure grounds, scientifically arranged so that the gratifications of the garden may be combined with new accessions of information, and the means of inculcating precepts of order at every step.'²⁹ In John Thimbelby's *Monodelphia*, 1832, there would be a garden of pleasure where 'the sublimity and grandeur of nature should be exhibited, in her rivers, her rills, cataracts, grottos, and groves; and the pleasing and

²⁸ Hamilton, *Owenism rendered consistent*, 25.

²⁹ S. Whitwell, *Description of an architectural model for a community*, London, 1830, 16.

admirable effects of Art, shewn in her fountains, bowers, illuminations and transparencies. Here should men realise their loftiest ideas of all that is sublime and beautiful, of all that they consider attractive and lovely.' 'There will', he went on, be 'a colonnade where the astronomer can display to his audience the wonders of the heavens; the naturalist those of the earth; and the composer delight the sense with the effects of music. In this place each one might amuse himself as he thought proper'.³⁰

So, each communitarian might amuse him or herself, but the pleasures and entertainments envisaged are clearly of the most rational and self-improving kind. They would promote self-development not self-indulgence; self-understanding not self-advertisement. They represented the productive and cerebral, rather than the whimsical and sensual use of leisure time. If such pleasures and entertainments were about fun, they were also, crucially, about self-realisation.

This idea of the creative possibilities opened up by the elimination of artificial wants was, of course, to be a leitmotif running through nineteenth-century British socialism. William Morris, for example, also looked to a socialist education of desire that would eliminate what he termed 'sham wants'; wants that rendered life needlessly complex and wants that were again seen as burdening labour with useless toil. Thus a hundred years before the term 'globalisation' came to dominate the patois of international political economy, a character in Morris' *News from Nowhere*, in reflecting on the evils that had existed prior to the emergence of the anarcho-communist utopia that he inhabited, singled out, 'that World Market, [which] once set a-going, forced [us] to go on making more and more of...wares whether [we] needed them or not. So that...[we] created in a never-ending series, sham or artificial necessities, which became, under the iron rule of the ... World Market, of equal importance...with the real necessities which supported life. By all this [we] burdened [our]selves with a prodigious mass of work merely for the sake of keeping their wretched system going'.³¹ In contrast, in Morris' *Nowhere*, as another character stated, 'we have [now] found out what we need and, as we are not

³⁰ J. Thimbelby, *Monadelphia; or, the formation of a new system of society*. Barnet, 1832, 20-21.

³¹ Wm. Morris, *News from nowhere, or an epoch of rest*, London, Longmans, Green & Co., 1920, 108.

driven to make a vast quantity of useless things, we have time and resources enough to consider our pleasure in making them.' For, he goes on, 'it takes time and leisure and minds not over-burdened with care to make...beautiful...necessary, good, things'.³² For Morris this was what was required for the emergence of true craftsmanship, for the emergence of work as re-creation: time, time free from the helotism demanded by the unrelenting pursuit of customised goods, designer labels, sham wants; free time that, for Morris, made possible the liberation of the creative impulse. But that possibility can only emerge for us when we 'find out what we need'.

For much of this Morris was profoundly indebted to Ruskin. Ruskin too was alive to the burdens that the consumption of the wealthy could impose on those who serviced their needs. Writing in *Time and tide*, 1867, he also evinced a repugnance for the sham wants of the middle classes, reminding them that their maintenance 'does not cost money only it costs degradation. You do not merely employ people you also tread on them...It cannot be helped...but see that you tread as lightly as possible.' And elsewhere, in the *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, 1849, he exhorted them to 'think of the manner of life which your demand necessitates'.³³

Yet if desire was to be educated, and, in that sense, personal consumption subjected to rational constraint, it is clear that private restraint was, for most early-nineteenth-century socialist writers, to be complemented by, indeed lay the basis for, *social* opulence. Thus a visitor to the co-operative community, again imaginatively constructed, this time by John Minter Morgan in his work, *The revolt of the bees*, published in 1831, remarked on 'the full supply of everything essential, not only to the comfortable but even luxurious subsistence' of its inhabitants. He noticed too 'the beauty of your walks, the fertility of your fields, gardens and parks; the convenient and elegant accommodations of every description; and, above all, the extent and magnificence of your buildings, notwithstanding the very temperate labour, or rather employment, of the inhabitants'. In

³² *Ibid*, 224, my emphasis.

³³ J. Ruskin, *Time and tide by Weare and Tyne*, 1867 in E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn (eds.), *The works of John Ruskin*, 39 Vols., London, Allen and Unwin, 1903-12, Vol. 17, 424; J. Ruskin, *The seven lamps of architecture*, 1849 in *ibid.*, Vol. 8, 264.

like manner the visitor described the rooms of the community as 'lofty with circular ceilings. In each [is] suspended two magnificent chandeliers of exquisitely cut glass, which in winter [are] lighted with gas, producing a splendid effect; the panels of the rooms [are] fawn colour with gold beading, and the curtains of a rich crimson, tastefully disposed in festoons with deep fringe. The roof [is] entirely of oak, and carved in imitation of the richest, Gothic fretwork...There [are] wines and liqueurs of various kinds...though they [are] but seldom asked for....the earthenware [is] brought to such great perfection as to be superior to that of the Chinese...Between the windows [are] slabs of the finest marble, supported by bronze figures: upon these marbles [are] placed large vessels of gold, filled with spring water and at each corner of the room [is] a marble figure holding a Roman lamp suspended by a chain.'³⁴

So, no bracing whiff of asceticism here; no featherless mattresses and ice-cold plunges. One suspects that the Ham Common Concordists, with their fresh-air-and-cold-water faddism, would have felt singularly out of place in such an establishment. What we have is something that approximates to the elegance and luxury of the English country house, not the rigorous and austere regime of the English public school. We have, certainly, the celebration of abundance; but, crucially, that celebration takes the form of social consumption. Private restraint lays the basis for social opulence. If there is a culture of contentment it is a collective and not an individualist culture. By definition, therefore, it does not involve the consumption of *un*social objects. In this context labour is not driven by the market imperatives unleashed by consumers; it is decided upon and sanctioned by the community as a whole. It is the consequence of a democratic decision that balances the social utility of consumption against the social and the individual disutility of additional labour. Consumption ceases to be the expression of an individual's purchasing power. It ceases to be a personal statement. It is no longer about the acquisition of positional goods. Its aim is no longer divisive. Rather, consumption in this context both underpins and expresses the social solidarity of the community. Consumption becomes too an expression of the community's artistic, intellectual,

³⁴ J.M. Morgan, *The revolt of the bees*, 5th ed., London, 1831, 397.

architectural, in short, its creative achievements. It becomes an assertion and a celebration of its values in both an economic and a moral sense. What the community produces is what *it* deems to be of worth. Its consumption represents an articulation of its very *raison d'être*; a statement, in effect, of its very identity - of what it is, what its values, what it, as a community, aspires to be. For this writer and for others like him, consumption was to be, above all else, an expression of social purpose and an articulation of society's achievements not a desperate, self-regarding, display of individual wealth. It must and it would involve the consumption of social not unsocial objects.

Now this, it seems to me, is a socialist vision of what consumption might be. It is one far removed from the asceticism of the Concordists but, equally so, from the consumer-driven socialism that post-Fordist socialists and others have iterated in the dog-days of the twentieth century. Its prescriptive and didactic nature may grate on modern, liberal sensibilities. It may commit the modern heresy of abrogating consumer sovereignty. It may suggest that if consumption is, as some would have it, a personal statement, then it is often a soliloquy to which society can ill afford to listen. It may imply the worthlessness of the aspirations of Essex man and, for that matter, Essex woman, and therefore be anathema to those whose objective it is to win elections rather than transform society. But it is, nonetheless, a vision that would lead its adherents to challenge a hegemonic culture of contentment that renders existing levels of direct personal and corporate taxation sacrosanct. It is one that calls into question the privileged role of the consumer in a capitalist market economy and, more generally, the idea of the consumer as rational arbiter of how society's resources can best be utilised. It forces us to think about the distinction between social and unsocial objects of desire. It raises the possibility that we could, and should, educate material desires not simply connive at them and it is a vision that embraces the notion that social consumption can have virtues to which private consumption cannot pretend. It also reminds us that the nature and extent of our social consumption says much about the society of which we are a part, its values, its priorities, its aspirations. Above all it is a vision that argues that consumption can be, and should be, rather more about the democratic identification and

satisfaction of needs and rather less about their determination by the extent of individual purchasing power.

Private restraint and social opulence: for some that may be a less uplifting slogan than workers of the world unite; but, I believe, for all that, it more nearly addresses our present predicament.

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