

## EXCHANGE/ECHANGE

“ . . . an ontology of stoned concepts ”

*William Leiss*

If Alkis Kontos does no more than to reinvigorate our arid social theory with his carefully-compounded rhetorical balm (he will do much more), he will have put all of us in his debt. No author could ask for a better review of his work.<sup>1</sup> It is a pleasure to try to respond.

To one who voluntarily submitted to the initiation rites of Hegel's *Logic*, an accusation that he has prescribed a dose of "pure empiricism" for his readers must come as a rude shock. Although I am tempted to reply with a jocular reference to the "identity of opposites" in dialectical thought, I will refrain and instead take up the substantive issue raised by Kontos.

My essay on needs and commodities has three objectives: (1) to place the discussion of human needs in the context of the interaction between man and environment (or between human and nonhuman nature); (2) to argue that the postulate known as "the insatiability of human wants" is an implausible heuristic model for modern social thought; (3) to suggest that radical social theory give the moribund notion of "commodity fetishism" a decent burial, so that it could consider more precisely the implications of recent trends in the state-managed variants of capitalism and socialism.

Obviously this is an ambitious undertaking. My stance in the essay is indeed tentative, in view of the bewildering complexity of the issues and the high risk of error. I am pleased that Kontos regards the environmentalist twist of my argument as a valuable new contribution, and I hope others will as well, no matter how they estimate the particular way in which I handled it. On the second point, I am not so naive as to believe that in the near future the postulate of insatiability will be presented in a more sophisticated manner in economics textbooks: That discipline is especially jealous of its prerogatives, and others better versed than I in the technical literature will have to take up the challenge.

The third point will prove especially troublesome, on account of the well-known propensity of radical theorists to expend their best energies on disputing fine points of doctrine with each other. I have suggested in a recent note (*Telos*, Fall 1976) that critical social theory has adopted a rather prudish attitude toward consumer behaviour in capitalist society, shielding its glance at the marketplace with a rigid notion of "false consciousness". The words which buttress the theory tumble out all too easily: manipulation of desire,

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1. *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Winter, 1977) pp. 127-132.

## WILLIAM LEISS

heterogeneous impulses, false needs. Like the multiplying epicycles of pre-Copernican astronomy, the elaborated but unregenerate critical apparatus threatens to disintegrate of its own weight.

The rejection of the true needs-false needs dichotomy in my essay is also a provisional position, taken in order to see whether critical theory's "emancipatory" interests could be better served by a different line of argument. From an analytical point of view this requires a suspension of disbelief that anything other than "inherent contradictions" in the "production process" could be the source of emancipatory drives (let us forget for a moment the stubborn search for "revolutionary class consciousness"). Thus in the section entitled "negative aspects of intensified commodity circulation", I introduced the notion of a "destabilization" of traditional categories of needing and associated tendencies: ambiguity and confusion in the sense of satisfaction and well-being, repression of qualitative-intensive, as opposed to quantitative-extensive, elements in the consumption process, and increasing environmental degradation.

This approach seemed to require a methodology which isolated "structural" aspects of contemporary consumer behaviour; if technical terminology were necessary, it could have been labelled a critical phenomenology of consumption, rather than (as Kontos would have it) a "pure empiricism." In a way it tries to follow up that curious, neglected suggestion by Marx, namely that no social form decays before all its potentialities have been revealed. I understand this to mean that we should at least take seriously the possibility that the predominant tensions of nineteenth-century capitalism, in relation to which critical theory's concepts and expectations were formed, may have been overcome (as the *principal* sources of social contradictions) in the further development of capitalism itself. If this is regarded seriously as a *possibility*, it does *not* follow that the social system of capitalism thereby becomes "closed". It does not follow that we are presented with a "totally administered society" — and I do not believe that we are — which is impervious to emancipatory thrusts.

What this approach does assume to be the case is that, due to its unique flexibility and adaptability among the range of historical types of class-based societies, capitalism gives rise to new sources of emancipatory potentiality. It assumes the possibility that one of these new sources is the market-based consumption process, which is now far more central to the overall system of social reproduction than it was even in the early part of the twentieth century. The task set by this approach is to investigate the tensions between the transformed patterns of domination, and the emancipatory possibilities, in the high-intensity market setting.

I must confess that this new locus of social tension has not been depicted adequately in my essay. The reason for this is, I believe, that at the time of writing I did not yet see clearly the full implications of my own argument. This is

## EXCHANGE

reflected in the obvious imbalance of the discussion: the section on the negative aspects of intensified commodity circulation should have been accompanied by a complementary section on its positive aspects. (Curiously enough, this would have meant following Marx's lead more closely, in terms of his alienation-individuality model for his discussion of expanding market exchange.)

In this respect Kontos is one of the Sirens, calling us back to the purely abstract negation of our situation. The "dominated individual" and the "monstrously defaced humanity" of which he speaks *is* present in that situation — but there is more, much more, and much that is good and, yes, liberating, both actually and potentially. Kontos knows this (I think), but does not say it. Must we leave all of that to the others, the spokesmen for the happy robots, for whom every new gadget is fresh proof of humanity's conquest of nature?

This is not the place to remedy the defect in the essay and to present the more balanced critique which I now think is required. I hope to develop this in an essay being prepared for the Winter 1978 issue of this *Journal*, which is part of a research project on lifestyle imagery in contemporary advertising undertaken in association with my colleague Steve Kline. As a result of the work done so far, I suspect that the received notions of commodity fetishism and reification in radical theory may be largely obsolete. So far as our general perspective is concerned, we are attempting to identify the potentially emancipating features in the sphere of consumption behaviour and to determine how these might be joined with related developments in work and production.

The fundamental objection in Kontos' review has not yet been addressed, however. He contends that one cannot formulate a critique of consumer behaviour without a normative framework rooted in a "historical ontology". Since I share his appreciation of the rationalist tradition in political thought from which this contention is derived, I would like to agree with him. He writes: "The term false needs refers to a political denial of a potentially other and humanly appropriate quality of life." Presumably we do not have to assert that the existing situation is inhuman and inappropriate in all respects. Having modified the proposition, we must ask: Where does the normative theory go from here?

Kontos has accepted the challenge; I look forward to the result, and not merely as an innocent bystander. For he might have been less charitable, and he might have remarked that my categories of destabilization, ambiguity, and confusion embody an implicit normative posture: an ontology of needs founded on the somewhat dubious values of stability and clarity. There are indeed some difficulties here, and I confess that I cannot resolve them to my own satisfaction at present.

It would be fair to say from a "rigorous" perspective that in *Limits to Satisfaction* I have given a descriptive account of stages in a historical process

## WILLIAM LEISS

wherein relatively stable forms of need-satisfaction were undermined and replaced by an extremely fluid, market-dominated socialization pattern. I believe that there were both positive and negative features in that older setting and the contemporary form possesses a very different alignment of both. The underlying purpose is to detail the specific reasons why individuals are prevented from realizing some of their own most highly-valued objectives by the very character of the intensified needs-commodities interplay itself. But is there also a measure outside that process by which to judge it? And if so, where is it grounded — in philosophy, anthropology — or poetry, as Kontos suggests?

The necessary work remains to be done. But a precautionary note must be sounded at the outset. In such undertakings we should pay heed to the force of Hegel's metaphor: truth emerges from a bacchanalian whirl of concepts in which no member remains sober. (Hegel himself might have done it more justice, for at the end of his exercises his own concepts always appear to emerge without so much as a mild hangover.) The concepts that shore up our normative edifice should bear the marks of immersion in the world's revels, and take their chances along with the rest of us. If it is ontology we must have, then let it be an ontology of stoned concepts.

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