

FAST FOOD, SHALLOW THOUGHTS

MARK ROGERS



“The innocent setting of the fast food restaurant masks a number of crimes against people thousands of miles away.”

Jeremy Seabrook, *New Socialist*, March '85

Political attitudes often reflect cultural prejudices more usually called “racist”. One of the more virulent contemporary “racisms” is the anti-Americanism common in England. This prejudice informs all socialist thinking about international relations, and is particularly venomous when related to our own national interests, as such interests are perceived by the left. A recent example is the discussion of fast food chains, that open because of popular demand fast and frequently all over the country. This is known as “fast food imperialism”. The *New Worker* (newspaper of the New Communist Party) even went so far, in its review of John Milius’ film *Red Dawn* to entertain, as a serious alternative, the notion that the Red Army was preferable to “Macdonald’s imperialism”!

INNOCENT FACADES

Jeremy Seabrook begins his article “Fast Food Junk Morality” in *New Socialist* with a description of the attractions of the hamburger bar. “Everything about the hamburger restaurant on the High Street suggests innocent enjoyment. A pure white light shines out from the windows onto the murky dusk, and an illuminated panel displays the tempting food.” “Young people work behind the stainless silver-coloured counter, in a livery that evokes nostalgia for high quality old-fashioned butcher’s shops.” There are, he says, 165 Macdonald’s in Britain: their

target is 1,000. Taken together with their rivals in the fast food industry, one might have supposed that this was all to the good. Good for the economy, good for youthful morale. But not so.

“The political implications of the hamburger go wide and deep.”

Behind this innocent, nostalgic atmosphere lies a vicious “reality”:

“The hamburger is a paradigm of much capitalist enterprise, where a large proportion of the real cost doesn’t appear in the cover or nominal price, but is paid elsewhere, by the powerless and the dispossessed, in distant places and at other times than at the brief and easily forgotten moment of consumption — by the low-paid non-union labour, the displaced subsistence farmers, and insofar as grain is diverted from human consumption, the very starving of the earth. In this context, the candour and innocence of the fast-food chains take on a more sinister aspect.”

ADVERTISING

Why don’t we know this? What is the mechanism of deceit that keeps hamburger-eaters from acknowledging their debt to, say, Brazilian peasants?

“A vast confusion is created by the competitive cries of all the advertisers and merchandisers, whose ideological function has been severely underestimated by the left; for this lies not so much in persuading people to buy what they don’t want, as in the manufacture and diffusion of a special kind of ignorance.”

So advertising is to be judged not on what it tells you, but on what it conceals. We still have a problem, though. How do we know that advertising is hiding anything? If the man on the hamburger bar stool is being misled by wicked capitalists, how is he to be properly informed? The answer lies in socialist prescience.

But this question is also connected with precisely what it is that Seabrook accuses the capitalist of doing.

“Indeed, the moment of communion between money and product is perhaps the closest thing we know to a sacrament.”

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

As socialists retreat from the actual practices of socialism, they become vague metaphysical utopianists. Socialism is no longer the result of following certain policies, but rather a reformulation of the human condition. Indeed, a religious longing creeps in. Jeremy Seabrook's writing dwells often upon "communions", "impieties" etc.. Capitalism devalues human experience by interposing the price mechanism between peoples who would otherwise, it is to be assumed, commune with each other in some undefined but pure way. And Seabrook's deepest longing, it would appear, is for purity, which he identifies with omniscient knowledge. Not the omniscient knowledge of God, but his own, that of "human beings and socialists". To know all that should be known would imbue the moment of transaction with purity — because, presumably, if we knew that the moment of purchase was killing a peasant then we would desist. In other words, Seabrook wants the market to transmit information that it is incapable of transmitting.

THE "SOCIALISM-TO-BE"

Only omniscient socialists can be trusted with the task of transmitting reliable non-market information. And this omniscience needs must be imperial: the information desired is from all corners of the productive globe; and the purpose of collecting it is to facilitate control. The information is not economic, but moral. Morals are held to determine the market.

A certain type of socialist is fond of arguing that actually-existing socialism is not socialism: it is laden with bureaucracy and arbitrary state power. Yet, just such a system would be required to eliminate the activities that they dislike. The moral regulators of commercial transactions what would they be except state or imperialist parasites, for they are not a necessary part of the market process and their employment would push prices and/or taxes up.

There is a disturbing parallel to, such a crusade for moral purity in commercial transactions and one that set up bureaucratic institutions for assessing and transmitting just the kind of moral information that Seabrook believes so desirable. The Nazis' scruples about Jewish influence in commerce (which they described in much the same language of mulcting and exploiting) led to boycotts and moral investigations into the origins of business relations. "Jew" could as easily be substituted for "American" (or any of the words that connote American) in the writings of Seabrook and his ilk. The "American" with his "fast food imperialism" is guilty of the same crimes as the "Jew": denigrating the hapless worker, forcing that worker to work for less than he "should" (overlooking the fact that it might be a choice between wages or no wages rather than wages or higher wages).

THE RESENTMENT OF ENTERPRISE

"It has been argued that fast-food chains are areas of job growth. This is true; but they employ young people at low wages, on work that can offer them few long-term prospects."

This is to describe precisely why they are areas of job growth: more chains, more jobs; jobs at low wages (instead of no wages) mean less preliminary qualifications, except a willingness to work. Lack of long-term prospects means a fluid market in jobs as one set of youngsters moves out to better (or simply other) things, creating vacancies for the next lot. Low wages are productive of jobs.

When Seabrook complains of the lack of a future in the hamburger industry for most of those who enter it young, he is indulging the fatal fallacy about employment: the identity of the person with his work. The fallacy was strenuously em-

ployed during the miners' strike: once a miner, always a miner. Of course, in rural communities there is a closer identity of person with job — but that is because there are fewer jobs. In urban settings there are more jobs, and so most people choose a variety of employments before settling into a single one.

What Seabrook really doesn't like is entrepreneurship. He comes very close to actually describing why this industry does indeed create jobs. "The hamburger and fast food chains which supply such appetising meals for kids have also become one of the main "pioneers" in the recruitment of new forms of cheap young labour ("It's 150,000 kids busting their tails out there that makes us tick," a director of McDonald's has been quoted as saying)." I don't know exactly what Seabrook means by "new forms" of cheap labour, but is he seriously telling us that those 150,000 jobs *should not exist*?

SOCIALIST REACTIONARIES

The overwhelming impression conveyed by this sort of analysis is a hatred of commerce. This is a very reactionary attitude. The most aristocratic despiser of the middle class petty trader could hardly better Seabrook's invective. During the 19th century, before government became very large, those who hated the middle class, and therefore hated the processes that lead to prosperity, joined the diplomatic services to escape the "constrictions" of commerce. They felt cleaner in the desert or the jungle. Nowadays, the haters of wealth and productivity go into local government. They used to go into monasteries and Seabrook's language of the impieties of trade suggests that that might once more have to be an option for those who hate trade. The growth of community living is a secular version of the monastery, but even a monastery has to earn its living. It is its communalism that cushions the individual members from the constraints of commerce, and aids the illusion that they are having nothing to do with the market place.

We are accused of not knowing these things, and the culprit for this ignorance is the advertiser. But does it occur to critics such as Jeremy Seabrook that he may not know these things, not because there is a vast conspiracy to hush them up, or because the market is unable to transmit these moral alarm-signals, but simply because he misunderstands economics? These things are not known, because they are not happening.

As Seabrook's article shows, it does occur to him that a low-paid job is worth having if it is a choice between that job and no job. But his polemics lead him to ignore the choices involved at the personal level, and to preach a higher morality. Is a youngster, anxious for a job, really going to forgo employment because of the possibility that not all the means his employer uses are morally watertight? Even dafter is the idea that such a youngster should contribute to the campaign against poverty by impoverishing himself. Commonsense economics, of which I suspect there is a great deal more than is commonly assumed by elitist commentators, would tell such a youngster that the end of poverty is more likely of achievement by adding to the world's resources of wealth, himself included.

Similarly, there is just the hint of an acknowledgement that hamburger eating is a source of prosperity (along with a host of other "decadent" activities from cat-food manufacture to apricot-shampoo advertisement making), not only creating jobs and therefore wealth that would not otherwise exist here, but in the so-called exploited countries too. The role of high priest is too tempting to forgo for the sake of some rather mundane economic truths.

"Consciousness-raising"? By whom and of whom and how? What will be done with the unregenerate consumer of hamburgers?