

WHAT'S IN THE 'FULL OPTION'?

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Two of this century's greatest philosopher-critics, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, demonstrated that the truth of a social system lies in its most trivial details. Such is surely the case with the current popularity in Sri Lanka of the so-called 'full option' found in a variety of new 'luxury items' (especially automobiles)—the avoidance of which is not an option today for anyone even momentarily caught up in the ever more compulsory mindset of the consumer, since the latter displaced every form of the citizen as the most desirable and universal mode of 'being-in-the-world.' For quite apart from enumerating the irresistible features of the latest personal computer, television set and cellular-phone that our subjectively elastic middle class is firmly obliged to acquire, the phrase 'full option' attached to consumer goods now promises us an intoxicating sense of empowerment.

Not so long ago, one heard the relatively modest word 'optional' in the rhetorical space presently occupied by the more tempting 'full option,' when the former simply referred to those extra features you wished to have installed by special request in your car or bathroom in addition to the standard ones. Such 'options' of personalizing to some extent your own mass-produced possessions may have stemmed the worldwide depression of the predominantly Fordist economy in the early 1970s by giving way to post-Fordist or 'flexible production,' and ushered in a 'culture industry' more totalizing than the one witnessed by Max Horkheimer and Adorno in Los Angeles circa 1944 (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*); but they did not, apparently, go far enough to overcome the consumer's existential *angst* and thereby ensure the sweeping hegemony of a new kind of commodity culture known for better or worse as postmodern. The subsequent (1990's) advertising habit of appending a 'plus' to model and brand names presented an improvement over this 'optional' state of affairs from the point of view of capital—although only a minor one, especially after that habit became compulsive, and the ubiquitous 'plus' divulged its status as a merely quantitative (this 'plus' that 'plus' the other 'plus'... *ad infinitum*) rather than a qualitative improvement. The semiotically superior 'full option,' by contrast, represents a genuine step forward for the culture of capital—and it is to the credit of the Sri Lanka advertising industry to have popularized it more aggressively than have their Western masters or, to put it more diplomatically and optimistically, counterparts. (This is, by the way, not the first time the Sri Lankan comprador bourgeoisie and its hired guns have demonstrated their world-class word power on behalf of global capital: was it not our late President Premadasa who did one better than both Thatcher and Reagan by calling privatization 'peopleization'?) For now, with the 'full option,' by the very virtue of being a consumer you are assured in impeccable Sri Lankan English not merely that you possess all the options (the former 'options'), but above all that you possess *all* the options—and are therefore sovereign.

Beneath such omnipotence, to be sure, lurks impotence. The latter routinely reveals itself, for instance, in the everyday ritual of commuting to work: nothing in the enviable range of your precious new vehicle's 'full options' helps you during the morning rush hour, which forces you to crawl at a snail's pace in lethal traffic and poisonous smog along every road leading to Colombo (much like how millions of Los Angelenos and Angelenas languish for several hours each day in what are still called 'freeways,' slouching towards downtown or in search of suburbia). Likewise, when you switch on the television, none of its latest 'options' saves you from the bombardment of mind-numbing advertisements, punctuated by the cynical claptrap of self-serving politicians that is an affront to the intelligence of even those who only sense *jouissance* in every advertisement. I take it that such contradictions are not necessarily less jarring for the numerically dominant class of Sri Lankans that hangs precariously below the objectively shrinking middle, even if they could legitimately play with 'full option' stuff only in the wildest of their borrowed dreams. In any case, the perpetual revelation of impotence by the very gadgets designed to deliver omnipotence points to the common but fatal error of confusing technological progress and the actualization of the free-market utopia ('end of history') with human emancipation as such, which of course would be impossible without a self-consciously and collectively organized political movement of the people. (Whether in Colombo or Los Angeles, the rush hour problem will not be solved by more automated automobiles, not even better drivers or meaner cops, but by a vastly different kind of city planning that will not see the light of day without radically democratic and revolutionary politics—i.e., a genuinely empowered people.) Yet, precisely for the current shortage of such politics, the greater the terrible objectivity of impotence, the more lucrative becomes the market for omnipotence—as the former begs for compensation and sublimation in the image of the latter in order to render the lived-experience of multinational capitalism (i.e., postmodern consumerism) plausible and palatable, if only in our postcolonial imagination. The 'full option' is the postmodern opium of the masses.

When the actual impotence of the citizen metamorphoses into the fantastic omnipotence of the consumer, moreover, the 'full option' becomes also a testimony for the supposedly world-historical victory of *laissez-faire* markets over all politics and culture that is indeed the essence of 'postmodernism' (or, as Fredric Jameson said it in a memorable phrase, 'the cultural logic of late capitalism'). For the universalist logic of capitalism (about which those traditionally anti-universalist post-Marxists of various stripes have curiously little or nothing to say) compels every advertisement for a commodity to be an advertisement for commodification as well, just as it is today impossible to buy a commodity without also buying into the universal system of commodity production—the totality called global capitalism. Thus the subtlety of the 'full option' advertisement here lies in its subliminal message and subcutaneous moral:

now we have 'no option' but to happily embrace the free market, along with its social, cultural and political consequences. The 'full option' is the 'only option.'

Against the totalitarian nature of this imperialist injunction (i.e., there is only one way to do things—the 'American' way), however, no fascist nationalism need be summoned. For the complacent common sense that 'there-is-no-alternative-at-the-end-of-history' is now more than ever only barely concealed by the neoliberal ideology of freedom, even as it is taken for the gospel truth by our own ruling clique of conservatives and liberals representing not so much 'people' as 'economic-corporate' interests (local as well as global) poorly disguised as leading but undifferentiated political parties. Marx saw through this ideology of freedom with refreshing clarity in those wonderful passages of the *Communist Manifesto* on the 'revolutionary bourgeoisie' and how 'in the place of numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms' they 'set up that single unconscionable freedom—Free Trade.' But not only Marx. Following the recent cascade of crises in East Asian economies, chief economists of the IMF and the World Bank agreed with Marx (without due acknowledgement) as they confessed that 'the east Asian Crisis is as much a crisis of Western Capitalism as of Asian capitalism' (Jeffrey Sachs) and that 'the crisis was the result of private decisions gone wrong' (Joseph Stiglitz). Writing contemporaneously and exactly 150 years after the *Manifesto*, the great finance capitalist of our time George Soros—knowing global capitalism more intimately than our economic advisers who take orders from his Wall Street colleagues and their Washington lackeys—declared in his bestseller *The Crisis of Global Capitalism* that 'market fundamentalism is today a greater threat to open society than any totalitarian ideology.'

Now, if the Seattle police chief had read some Marx or heard the more sober voices in Wall Street instead of his 'intelligence reports,' then he might have been better prepared to greet those 50,000 visitors who arrived in his jurisdiction a few weeks ago—on the occasion of the WTO summit, 30 November 1999—bearing an idea of freedom different from free trade. But that was not to be. In the event, the lonely conscience of free trade found unmediated voice in thousands of police batons, pepper sprays, rubber bullets and tear-gas, with the US National Guard in attendance. Or perhaps it was just as well that in this case the medium was the message. For nowadays it literally takes a bloody beating on the head for our 'deconstructed' leftists as much as unreconstructed nationalists to realize that the economy still plays a mediated but determinant role in human affairs—or what used to be called history. And, these 'scenes not seen since the sixties' from Seattle would have also reminded some card-carrying ex-Marxists the *Situationist International* theoretician Guy Debord's thesis on cops (Formulated in the wake of urban uprisings sparked off by the 1965 'Watts Riots' in Los Angeles): 'What is a policeman? He is the active servant of the commodity.' One WTO protestor beaten up by several such 'servants of the commodity' wrote in a moving eyewitness account that she found the US media coverage of these Seattle events a lot more painful than the real thing. That feeling is not alone. Yet, even the concerted attempt to portray a truly mass political rally against the global free trade agenda on the WTO table as a conspiracy of rabble-

rousers to smash sheet glass and get free coffee from Starbucks (not yet available in Sri Lanka) could not help but proliferate literal images of a great metaphor in Marx's critique of capitalism: 'the artillery of commodities' firing away at masses on the run.

Fidel is right. Had anything like this happened in Havana, there would have been a NATO invasion of Cuba within 24 hours, on humanitarian grounds. But I am not trying to be anti-American or pro-Sri Lankan (or the other way around) here. Not at all. (Neither do I wish to endorse in any way the view expounded by any number of 'post colonial critics' like Partha Chatterjee that while the West is admittedly superior to the East materially, 'we' have it better spiritually and culturally. (The best brief riposte to that tired logic I've heard came from Professor Carlo Fonseka, in a guest lecture when I was an undergraduate student at Katubedda: 'in the West, they have sanitation without sanity; we have insanity without sanitation'). Rather, I have lived in both of these places and I see something wrong with the global economic system that now links them. So when I follow closely the 'full option' in Colombo, before I know it I end up in the streets of Seattle, via Los Angeles. Other detours and destinations are also possible, surely, depending on one's circumstances. The Seattle story, however, I find particularly instructive, given that the omnipotence projected in the 'full option' phantasmagoria of commodities is an imaginary resolution of the real contradiction of political impotence—the end of the citizen, along with the 'end of history'—that in turn demands free trade—by brute force, as we have seen, if not by mild coercion or active consent. Yet, among other things, the protesters in Seattle *rejected* the basis of freedom understood as the abundance of commodities—i.e., free trade—and *demand*ed the accountability of supranational economic interests to national or local political constituencies. The failure of the WTO summit thus signaled a victory over freedom defined economically—free trade—for freedom defined politically—democracy.

But we know also that 'actually-existing' bourgeois democracy has typically operated, succeeded even according to some standards, by insulating the more or less capitalist economy from democratic politics, by limiting the scope of the political. Marx said this, even if no one is listening now. Globalization as we know it, which is a code-word for what Lenin called 'the development of capitalism' and David Harvey refers to as 'the latest stage in the development of capitalism,' has only increased this time-honoured gap between the economic and the political—especially spatially. Then in Seattle for once we heard a massive cry to abolish that gap—to bring the global economy into the arena of democratic politics organized at various spatial scales. The results may not be immediately radical, but, for the time being, this demand represents a step in the right direction for the political left. For at least implicit in it is an agenda of extending radically-democratic politics to the whole of society, not excluding the economy; or, if the word 'politics' is now too hopelessly tainted, then as Karl Polanyi put it, of extending 'freedom beyond the narrow confines of the political sphere into the intimate organization of society itself.' Either way, freedom will not come to Colombo (or go anywhere else) in the latest 'full option' car, but may yet emerge from a 'full option' democracy. ■