

Theory of the Zone - Postliterate - Medium

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1.

In our society of commodity abundance, we have grown accustomed to its logic. Not merely through ideology, but also through our human instinct to justify that which needs not justification — in short, our acceptance of the familiar. We begin to believe in its bizarre logic or even advocate for more of it, and in minor cases of confrontation we say, “it’s not *perfect*, but...”

The Zone is a temporal and territorial event which entirely undermines the logic of our society of commodity abundance. There mere existence of the Zone immediately explodes its logic entirely.

The Zone opens up in riots, strikes, and insurrections — particularly where looting is more prevalent. At the event of the Zone, not only is the completely illogical nature of the commodity revealed, but also its brutally coercive nature is as well. In the Zone, the violence and blood which hides behind the commodity as invisible in daily life has its cover stripped back, revealing its bare essentials: men with weapons prepared to cage or kill human beings.

The looter, desperate for clothes, food, televisions, is the first half of the undermining of the commodity, representing the illogical outcomes of the society which contains it in abundance. The policeman, prepared to beat back and jail trespassers, is the second half of this undermining, representing the necessary suppressions of natural responses to the society of commodity abundance.

What is revealed is that the commodity-form is an unnatural association, kept unnatural by force (all unnatural associations must be.) Just as Freud's idea of civilization repressed the pleasure principle, scattering it to the outskirts of society and making its violent repression invisible in daily life, so too does the commodity-form repress, and natural responses to it in the spontaneous emergence of Zones are reserved to "freak accidents."

Yet, by this logic, the Zone represents something underneath, just as the pleasure principle is something underneath, and it is doubtful that it will remain buried for very long — nor is it desirable that it should.

2.

The Death of the Zone represents a higher stage of commodity-society, embodied in the wealthier sectors of modern economy. In the slums, the innate knowledge that life is hell is felt more as the natural outside of a terroristic inside economy; thus, the commodity-form appears as more alien and necessary to escape from. However, in the suburbs and in the high-class developments, there is no longer this degree of separation; the commodity has invited them inside for dinner and they see no reason to leave. Pampered and treated by it, the potentiality for the disappearance of the commodity is understood for them as the disappearance of the whole of human life.

In these latter sectors, all needs are the same as commodity-desires; the impulse to consume is felt as the same as the need to eat or sleep. The theory of the Zone can never work here, because the Zone requires a degree of separation from the commodity-form for it to be understood as some "natural" response. As Marcuse wrote in *One-Dimensional Man*:

“...the extent to which this civilization transforms the object world into an extension of man's mind and body makes the very notion of alienation questionable. The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home,

kitchen equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed, and social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced.”

This might come as no surprise; indeed, if they are the first to benefit from it, why shouldn't they be the first to invite it in? However, what is most curious is the bleeding of this reality into more economic sectors — even poor ones — with the same logic in place (what Marcuse called, “*the flattening out of the contrast [...] between the given and the possible, between the satisfied and the unsatisfied needs.*”) Today, it is the *anticipation* of the commodity which appears before the commodity itself.

“If the worker and his boss enjoy the same television program and visit the same resort places, if the typist is as attractively made up as the daughter of her employer, if the Negro owns a Cadillac, if they all read the same newspaper, then this assimilation indicates not the disappearance of classes, but the extent to which the needs and satisfactions that serve the preservation of the Establishment are shared by the underlying population.”

Now, even in the poorest areas, fetish for endless commodities of the newest fad are emergent. In this sense, the Zone is no longer applicable as a concept once the separation between genuine needs and commodity-desire disappears. If a Zone were to open up in these conditions, it would simply mean *more* consumption, *more* fetish, and a release of commodity-desire. But the commodity is not actually in danger in these faux-Zones, because these Zones feature the free acquisition of *commodity-desires* and not genuine objects, and so the commodities' value as fetishes are still largely determined by the fact that they usually have a price-tag (i.e., if a high-end shirt is seized during the event of a faux-Zone, the price-tag is still *anticipated* in order to provide it its value.) The value in these commodity-

desires are largely in the fact that they are commodities, and so their requirement that they be bought and sold is a *desired feature*, and not an impediment to their appeal.

3.

There may be no easy escape from the logic of commodity-desire: the desire which hijacks such a fundamental part of political economy that *Capital* had to ignore it. It may be only through the development of revolutionary consciousnesses that we can condition ourselves to be free of the modern bureaucratic machine which conditions our needs and desires.

In some ways even the SI has come to seem old-fashioned, saying in *On the Poverty of Student Life* that:

“The revolt of youth was the first burst of anger at the persistent realities of the new world — the boredom of everyday existence, the dead life which is still the essential product of modern capitalism, in spite of all its modernizations.”

Today modern capitalism (or possibly postmodern?) represents the last vestiges of excitement in a cold, bureaucratic prison-society. No longer do we desire freedom, but the cut-up, ready-made micro-sliced “freedoms” found in the soft narcosis, simstim eternity of techno-capital. Capital is no longer the unnatural invasion of an alien entity, but the bosom of happiness which we feel no obligation to leave.

But even if our idea of real needs and commodity-desire are melting into one (our real necessities of life are sold back to us as commodities, the same as the others), it is still possible, at least for now, to parse the two. We can and should condition society to parse the two, and this conditioning must be the necessary prerequisite to the development of communist society — in short, a sort of “cultural revolution,” as much as that word has a reputation.

But act fast, because it may not be long until the pseudo-reality contained in the Spectacle becomes for all the *true* reality; at that point, it would be too late to try to “unplug” from the system, because the plug will be gone.