TV Advertising

FETISH OF THE CAPITAL-COMMODITY RELATIONSHIP

By Pauline Lower

In contemporary western society, free enterprise is not freedom, first of all, because the generative source of its wealth is founded upon a commodity/capital oriented relationship. The further these liberal societies develop "...the more does getting rich depend on having capital, rather than on work...". In theory, in a liberal democratic system, anyone can found a newspaper or a television station, but in practice the cost would be prohibitive to any persons other than a consortium of the economic elite - the owners of capital. In Marxian terms, the essence of capital lies in its:

...power of command over labour and its products. The capitalist possesses this power, not on account of his personal or human qualities, but as the owner of capital. His power is the purchasing power of his capital which nothing can withstand.

Capital is profit and therefore objective. The capitalists gain this objective power through the regenerative process of the production, distribution, consumption and exchange of commodities.

We can therefore deduce 'a priori' that:

Premise 1 Capital is profit.

Premise 2 Profit is surplus value acquired by the capitalists through the production, distribution, consumption and exchange of commodities, i.e. their market value.

Premise 3 The market value of commodities is the means by which the capitalists acquire their purchasing power.

Conclusion A commodity is therefore the cell or element upon which the whole system of capitalist wealth is founded.

In modern industrialized society it is the commodity that reigns supreme because of its power to accumulate capital. In
an established and growing world market economy, competition between individual capitalists has been largely eliminated and replaced by corporations and conglomerates who have to compete on a multi-national scale in order to survive the technological revolutionization of the forces of production which they themselves created. There is always competition in capitalism. Therefore, exploitation of established markets for the sale of commodities has to be done through the persuasive pressure of advertising, which stimulates new needs and also outmodes old commodities, such as last year's cars.

Commodity advertising has become the means whereby competing corporate enterprises maintain or establish their share of the existing consumer market, and that the biggest slice of their profit is made from advertising on television. TV advertising has become the regenerative source of the commodity-capital relationship. John Kenneth Galbraith qualifies this point:

Technology, once again, solved the problems that it created. Coincidentally with the rising mass incomes came first radio and then television. These, in their capacity to hold effortless interest and their accessibility over the entire cultural spectrum, and their independence of any educational qualification, were admirably suited to mass persuasion. Radio and more especially television have, in consequence, become the prime instruments for the management of consumer demand. There is an insistent tendency among solemn social scientists to think of rhymed and singing commercials.....which hint implausibly at opportunities for anti-septic seduction, as inherently trivial. This is a great mistake. The industrial system is profoundly dependent on commercial television and could not exist in its present form without it.

It is also the contention of this essay that in private broadcasting enterprises, it is the powerful corporate advertisers who are the masters of television information and programming. One must remember that the:

...Mass media of information are made available to the public for nothing (radio, television) or sold below their cost (newspapers) .... It is advertising that makes up the deficit just as it finances private radio and television programmes.
The degree to which television networks are pressured by powerful sponsors will depend upon whether there is positive state or federal legislation on matters of content. Nevertheless, for the network as well as the sponsor, making a profit is the name of the game, just as it is the aim of other capitalist enterprises. To make capital out of a commodity.

...one needs as much publicity as possible. To obtain the maximum publicity the maximum number of viewers is necessary. The editorial sugar which surrounds the advertising pill must therefore be made as palatable as possible to as large a number of people as possible.

In order for a television programme to have populist appeal and so attract a large potentially consumer oriented, advertising agents tend to pressure television programmers to programme for the sensational, which, they contend, increases viewers, and, therefore - profits.

These programmes tend to be fiction rather than fact, because the former can exaggerate, manipulate, and over-dramatize such categories as sex, crime, violence, comedy and various scandals etc., without arousing too much 'flak' from sectors of public opinion. People are criticizing and social scientists are investigating the amount of crime and violence that is being shown on television and its possible effects, particularly as it relates to children and juvenile delinquency, but they have been unable to come up with any concrete conclusions as to its long term effects upon the socialization of the child. Until these public bodies find such evidence, audiences will get, and advertisers will sponsor, these sanitized and repetitive programs of violence and brutality.

This does not mean, however, that controversial issues, such as abortion, pornography, drug addiction, police violence etc., are not given air time; indeed, they are discussed quite frequently, because they are valid, pertinent and unavoidable social issues. This type of programming, because of its factual and down to earth comment is usually relegated to non-peak time viewing, or it is taken up by community or educational television or sponsored by the public service sector of a network.

Big commodity advertisers are noticeable by their absence; they avoid it in their belief that it is potentially dangerous in its offensiveness to certain sectors of public opinion so alienating them from the programme. This would seem to treat certain sectors of the public as being 'infantile', unable to face up to some of our social dilemmas. Television is supposed
to inform as well as entertain, and advertisers, by not supporting real concrete social issues are indirectly aiding in the 'cretinization' of the public. If, as the big advertisers obviously believe, that viewers can watch an over-dramatized fictitious version of drug abuse or police violence etc., why not give them the credibility of being able to assess objectively, the factual realities of the same problem as it exists so making them socially aware? Instead, commercial networks are plunging viewers into an unreal, artifically contrived and puerile atmosphere which separates and distracts them from the real facts of the problem.

We are in danger of becoming the unconscious victims of commodity oriented repetitive programming - passive, misinformed and ill prepared to participate meaningfully in our civic duties. To paraphrase Marshall McLuhan - the medium is no longer the message, but the massage. According to Duverger "...The Communists say that this is a conscious process designed to lull the masses into forgetting that they are being exploited and to paralyse their will to rebel...". What Duverger says actually does happen is that:

Objectively, the news services in liberal regimes tend to produce this result. Subjectively, it does not seem to be the result of a conscious process, deliberately willed, but the process of pleasing the consumer. 7

From Duverger's viewpoint this would seem to suggest that the consumer gets what he wants. From another viewpoint it could also be suggested that in a competitive capitalist consumer oriented economy, the consumer is psychologically coerced, through the subtle nuances and pressures of television commercials, into believing that what he gets - he wants.

Technological advancement, or, in Marxist terms, the continued revolutionization of the forces of production, has also changed the character of the commodity form from what Daniel Bell terms the secondary stage of industrial development - manufacturing - to the tertiary stage, where emphasis is placed upon the service sector, that is, the commercial appurtenances that surround the successful, distribution, consumption and exchange of the commodity in the competitive market place. The biggest economic slice of that service sector goes to commercial advertising - consumer research, packaging and presentation of the commodity whose "...greatest single source of exposure is television...", because of both its audio and its visual impact. As McMahan puts it:

The sense of sight and the sense of sound have long worked their independent ways to do effective selling. The billboard is
effective. (The Press is effective). Radio is effective. It follows that television, with both sight and sound, should be more effective. Plus this fact: The sight is sight-in-motion. 9

Television commercials have therefore become the bailiwick for the exposure of mass produced commodities. This profitable economic medium allows a commodity to universalize itself into a 'status symbol' both for the capitalist and the consumer. It is this new commodity mechanism which has profoundly influenced the socio-psychological patterns of human social activities in terms of life-style. It has created a materialistic oriented society of consumers - a middle-class labour force (with purchasing power) enmeshed in their own desire to acquire these 'status symbols', which they are led to believe, will enhance that life-style. For the capitalist advertisers, commodity commercials have become the prime objective, and the generative source of his capital; for the consumer, the objective and generative source of his status.

It was man's "Fetishism" for the commodity which Marx emphasized in "Kapital", and that was to synthesize his indictment of capitalism, because of the commodity's power to reify man in society; that man becomes objectified in his one dimensional pursuance of creating new commodities. That these products of his technical and commercial ingenuity would reduce man's relevance as a human and social being in society until there existed only "...material relations between person, and social relations between things..." a society in which man becomes the slave of the object - the commodity.

For Marx the commodity, like religion has become 'an opiate for the masses'. The commodity of the television commercial becomes blessed with all kinds of miraculous qualities that enhance its 'mystique'. This so-called mystique usually has a very subtle psychological or social message and is made to appeal to either our psycho-sexual or psycho-social drives. But, these drives, which form the fundamental base of human personality structure, (Freud & Erikson) have, through the psycho-social messages of the TV advertising medium, become de-humanized and debased. These commercial messages are not only debasing the potential of talented writers who are being utilized to cloak innocuous and insignificant commodities into pseudo-significance, but they are also debasing the significance of the contemporary woman's role in society to insignificance.

Footnotes on page 17

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