

# POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SPORT AND POP MUSIC

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The bourgeoisie, whenever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors' and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment'. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value... (K. Marx and F. Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party)

What do 'Kerry Packer's Pirates' and Abba have in common? One answer (albeit not the only possible one!) is that they are both examples of the increasing penetration of capital into our social fabric. Packer's recent venture into sports promotion and the development of groups like Abba which bring younger and younger consumers into the music industry can both be usefully interpreted in this context. Capitalism is a dynamic system: no stone is left unturned in the quest for profits and the restless process of accumulation causes continual assaults on conventional social mores. This has important consequences which can only be examined in an analytical framework which deals with the interaction between economic and social phenomena. This short article seeks to demonstrate how some apparently isolated social phenomena fit into the process of capitalist development.

Accumulation is the driving force of the capitalist system. The quest for maximum attainable profits leads firms to constantly seek to expand their capital. This process is not itself the consequence of greed by individual capitalists, although it is true that the system is characterised by ideologies which legitimise, and indeed glorify, greed. Rather it is a structural feature of the system, as Marx pointed out over a century ago. Contrary to the wishful thinking of J.S. Mill a 'steady-state' capitalism is not on the menu of choices. This is not to say that economic growth is assured under capitalism: clearly this is not the case at the moment! Rather the point is that the viability of the system depends on the continued generation of the conditions for such expansion.

Economic growth under capitalism is a process of internal contradictions which frequently erupt as crises. It is seldom harmonious because the very process creates its own antagonisms. For example, growth leading to full employment tends to choke itself off to the extent that such full employment increases the bargaining position of workers and hence their ability to increase wages at the expense of profits. More formally we can say that the conditions for accumulation under capitalism include the existence of (i) an 'industrial reserve army' which can provide the labour force required for the expansion of production; (ii) requisite quantities of means of production to permit expansion of production as capi-

tal is reinvested, (iii) a market for the growing volume of goods produced, and (iv) the reproduction of the social relations of production.

It is the inability of the system to continuously generate these conditions which leads to periodic crises. Such crises have the effect of renewing the conditions for further accumulation and hence, in effect, shift the accumulation process on to a new and higher plane. But that new plane becomes in turn difficult to sustain. Particularly troublesome is the problem of realisation crises because accumulation for accumulation's sake inevitably leads to a 'tendency to produce without regard to the limits of the market'. How then can the market be expanded so as to provide the conditions for further accumulation?

One method, on which there has been much focus by institutional economists such as J.K. Galbraith as well as by Marxists such as Baran and Sweezy, is the creation of new consumer wants (or, more precisely, the translation of wants into needs). Market saturation is prevented by a high level of persuasive advertising, often in conjunction with planned obsolescence which limits the effective life of consumer durables.

A second method is geographical expansion of the capitalist system.<sup>1</sup> Historically this has been associated with the process of imperialism, and the continuing internationalisation of capital, which finds its most characteristic institutional form in the transnational corporation, continues this relentless movement. The forces are so strong that, from time to time, individual capitals even break their own collective 'rules of the game', e.g. recent sales of coal by Utah Mining to Vietnam.<sup>2</sup>

Thirdly, capital can respond to the tendency to crises by penetration into new spheres of activity. The transformation of peasant-subsistence agriculture into corporate farming has been a case in point in many other countries. Such possibilities invariably exist because a system like capitalism is not established overnight. Indeed, economic and social systems never exist in a pure form. As Dobb puts it, 'important elements of each new society, although not necessarily the complete embryo of it, are contained within the womb of the old; and relics of an old society survive for long into the new'.<sup>3</sup> So, at any given point of time, there is invariably scope for capitalism to advance even within the boundaries of one 'capitalist' nation.

It is on this last point that the remainder of this article concentrates because it provides a framework for analysing a range of familiar social phenomena.

To take one example, developments in the pop music industry provide a neat illustration of the increasing penetration of capital. Particularly important in this context is the way in which the market has been expanded from the adult population to also include young children. A couple of decades ago, in the hey-day of rock 'n' roll, the increased participation of teenagers (as performers but more particularly as consumers) was a noteworthy and controversial feature of the industry. The musical lyrics were appropriately oriented towards problems of adolescence, and the adolescents responded with record purchases in record volume (to be played, of course, at record volume!). Since then the average age of record-buyers has been declining further, though it is difficult to document this systematically. The 'bubble-gum' music of the late 'sixties introduced the teeny-boppers and now the 'weeny-boppers' have an ever-growing market share.

Various aspects of these developments in the pop music industry are of interest. Obviously, they have been associated with a change in focus of musical form to simple and repetitive tunes and towards lyrics accessible to young children. From 'High School Blues' and 'Get a Job' to 'Disco Duck'... But in order to sustain the attention (and record purchases!) of the older teenagers a different approach is needed. In this context the so-called 'new wave' is of some interest. The exponents of punk rock are successful precisely because they thumb their noses

at the establishment. Hence there arises a conflict between money and conventional standards in the music industry. In the short run attempts are made to uphold the conventional standards. For example, E.M.I. records discontinued their contract with the British group, Sex Pistols, because of the group's offensive behaviour, tendency to say 'fuck off, you cunts' to reporters, and so on. However, all is now well again and they and other 'nasty' musical outfits are coining it in for the record companies and concert promoters. The conflict between profitability and traditional morality is resolved as usual, for the time being at least.

Sport provides a further excellent example of the continuing penetration of capital and is of particular current relevance because of new advances in sporting sponsorship and because of Kerry Packer's deal with the cricketers variously known as 'Packer's Pirates' and 'Packer's Cricket Circus'. The invasion of a social territory with significant vestigial precapitalist elements is particularly interesting because of the consequent conflicts. In particular the M.C.C., the sporting symbol of British conservatism, is fighting a rear-guard action by, among other things, sacking Tony Greig as captain for the current Test series. The International Cricket Conference, representing the six Test-playing nations, has threatened to ban Packer's Pirates from official Tests for life, saying that 'the ambition of every cricketer should be to play for his country, both home and abroad. Anything that detracts from this ambition and risks lowering the status of Test cricket is against the interests of the game'.<sup>4</sup> Money versus tradition: any takers?

One interesting aspect of the affair is its link with the competition between cigarette companies in Australia. Of the three brand leaders in the cigarette market the two previously most strongly associated with sports sponsorship (Benson and Hedges and Marlboro) have risen more rapidly in market share than the third (Winfield) over the last three years. During this period Amatil (who produce Benson and Hedges) and Philip Morris (Marlboro) have made major interventions into sporting sponsorship as direct television advertising was phased out. This, of course, provides 'indirect' advertising on television because of the prominence of brand-name hoardings and the frequent mention of the sponsor's name. Certainly the firms seem convinced of its effectiveness. Amatil are committed to a \$350,000 sponsorship of the Australian cricket team over the years 1977 to 1979, while Philip Morris have a \$500,000 plus contract with the Lawn Tennis Association of Australia covering the period 1976-79 and a \$1.5 million deal with the Victorian Football League over the years 1977-81.<sup>5</sup>

What is not well known about Kerry Packer's Pirates is that the cricketers three-year contracts, reportedly involving some \$7.5 million, were signed with J.P. Sport which is an offshoot of John Cornell and Paul Hogan's company, J.P. Productions. Hogan and Cornell are presenters for Rothmans' Winfield. Now, it doesn't take a genius to see that the deal is part of Rothmans' competitive strategy vis-a-vis Amatil and Philip Morris. Amatil is particularly disadvantaged because it is likely that only the A.B.C. will televise the Australia-India Test series next summer which they are sponsoring. Benson and Hedges banners will doubtless be seen around the grounds but Amatil will be unable to show its corporate commercials during telecasts. One up to Rothmans! It is this inter-firm rivalry which provides the explanation of increased penetration of capital in specific instances. This illustrates the general point that competition takes new forms under the monopoly phase of capitalism but the dynamics of capitalist expansion are in no way diminished.

What are the long-run consequences? It takes little imagination to see that sport will eventually be arranged exclusively to serve the interests of monopoly capital. In the short run the casualties are the traditional elements such as the conservatives from Lords (and maybe we won't shed tears for that!) but in the long run the framework of sporting choices may well be drastically restructured. It is doubtless true that income to sporting organisations comes increas-

ingly more from sponsorship than from 'gate money'. In this sense it must be admitted that such sponsorship often maintains sporting activities. But the effect is typically to centralise and concentrate the activities into bonanza events suitable for television, e.g. the Amco cup, the Berger Paints snooker tournament. The gulf between the 'in' players and the rest widens and sport becomes not so much a part of community life but a series of occasional grand spectacles. Could it be that there is in effect, a tendency towards 'concentration and centralisation of sport'?

The question of how to respond to the increasing penetration of capital is a difficult one. It may be argued that it should be supported because it is a progressive force in breaking down vestigial feudal institutions and attitudes. One is reminded of Marx's support for certain colonial activities as progressive forces bring backward nations into the process of social advance. Sure, it is difficult to cry for the wallahs from Lords and the I.C.C. who are losing their traditional grip on cricket. Similarly, why worry about the weeny-boppers? An early introduction to pop music may be very conducive to development of musical appreciation: anyway, let them have their fun! However there is another side to the story, one which recognises the ideological significance of these developments. The greater the penetration of monopoly capital throughout our social fabric the greater the potential for ideological dominance. This is particularly important because of the role of television in relation to all these matters: music, sport, and so on. Once these ideological dimensions are recognised the case for resisting the increased penetration of capital becomes more clear.

The simple idea perpetuated by the media that sporting activities are a 'gift' from big firms (and hence a reason to be appreciative to those organisations) is a clear example of ideological dominance. This is a systemic rather than a conspiratorial phenomenon - each individual firm is concerned with profitability but, as a whole, they act in a manner with significant consequences for ideology. This makes it all the more important.

What is clear is that capitalism has not yet finished its task. It is marching on across the playing fields and through the nursery. Board up your bedrooms! (Or is it already too late?)

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<sup>1</sup>The general argument is further developed in David Harvey, 'The Geography of Capital Accumulation: A Reconstruction of Marxian Theory', Antipode, vol. 7, no. 2, September 1975.

<sup>2</sup>Australian Financial Review, 16 May 1977.

<sup>3</sup>Maurice Dobb, Studies in the Development of Capitalism, revised edition, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., London, 1963, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup>Daily Mirror, 15 June 1977.

<sup>5</sup>Australian Financial Review, 17 May 1977.

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