

FAILURE OF THE MODEL OF «CONSUMER SOCIETY»

by MUÇO AHMETAJ

The «consumer society» did not create a new class of consumers, nor did it deproletarianize the capitalist society, as the bourgeois ideologists claimed with great publicity. On the contrary, by intensifying the exploitation of the working people, it polarized it still more

IT IS A QUARTER OF A CENTURY NOW THAT THE SO-CALLED CONSUMER SOCIETY HAS BECOME THE FAVOURITE SUBJECT OF THE BOURGEOIS PROPAGANDA. IT IS TRYING BY EVERY MEANS AND IN ALL POSSIBLE FORMS TO CONVINCING THE WORKING PEOPLE THAT WITH THE DEVELOPMENT OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY THERE IS NO MORE POVERTY AND, AS A CONSEQUENCE, EVERYBODY, BOURGEOIS OR PROLETARIANS, MERGE INTO A SINGLE CLASS WITHOUT CONTRADICTIONS AND STRUGGLE BETWEEN THEM.

THE REALITY, THE GRAVE ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF THE WORKING CLASS AND THE OTHER WORKING MASSES IN THE CAPITALIST COUNTRIES, THE GREAT CONTRADICTIONS AND CONFLICTS WHICH SHAKE THE SOCIO-POLITICAL LIFE OF THESE COUNTRIES, HAS DISCREDITED THIS TRICK OF THE BOURGEOISIE. THE THEORY OF THE «CONSUMER SOCIETY» HAS MELTED AWAY LIKE SALT IN WATER.

1.

The theory of the «consumer society» emerged in the conditions of the temporary enlightenment of the capitalist economy following the Second World War. The development of the technical-scientific revolution,

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the reconstruction of industry on the basis of modern technology and the setting up of new branches of industrial production were accompanied with the expansion of the production of the means of production and a certain growth of the volume of trade of broad consumer goods, especially

hardware, such as TV-sets, washing-machines, refrigerators, etc. The temporary occupation with work, the relative decrease of unemployment and the winning of some rights in the field of social insurance for which the working class had waged a protracted struggle, brought about an improvement in the standard of living of part of the working people in comparison with the pre-war period.

In these conditions, the big propaganda machine of the bourgeoisie was set in motion to make the working class believe that now a new society was being created, a society which was given the name of the «consumer society». Many books were written to «prove» its emergence and viability, claiming that «this society creates an abundance of material blessings for the majority of the population so that the demand of the consumers is no longer dependent on

economic motivation, their purchasing power, but on psychological motivations. The consumers now buy not just what they need, but, in the first place, what they like» (G. Katona, «The Mass Consumption Society», New York, 1964, p. 3), that allegedly the present bourgeois society is based on a high level of consumption and the incessant rise of the level of consumption is the main aim of production.

Thus, this theory is essentially intended to prove that today there is a levelling-out of the incomes of the working class with those of the bourgeoisie and, as a consequence, a new society with a new class, the class of consumers, without antagonisms, without class struggle, has been created, hence, a society which allegedly has made the proletarian revolution, unnecessary.

It is known that capitalist production, the capitalist relations of production, determine the nature of consumption also in this society according to the law of the maximum profit which is applied by the monopoly bourgeoisie. In the conditions in which the means of production are in the hands of the bourgeoisie which exploits the working class, it is unconceivable that the aim of capitalist production is the expansion of consumption for the working people.

In their attempts to assist the bourgeois propaganda the modern revisionists, especially the Eurocommunists, but also the Titoites, Khrushchevites and others, as the apologists of modern capitalism, claim that at present the worker enjoys so many material blessings that economic problems have been relegated to the last place for him. According to the Eurocommunists, the economic exploitation of the worker in the developed capitalist countries is no longer a problem. The important thing for him is to link himself as closely as possible with capital, which allegedly is to the advantage of the worker, because this keeps him alive and ensures the growth of individual consumption according to the «laws of abundance».

Marx has long ago clarified the true

character of individual consumption. He says that «the individual consumption of the workers ensures, on the one hand, their living and reproduction and, on the other hand, by destroying the means of livelihood, makes it constantly necessary for them to come out on the labour market.»¹ So the individual consumption of the worker is an immediately productive consumption for the capitalist, because through it he ensured the reproduction of the work force which creates capital, while the worker is compelled to sell his labour power in order to ensure the means of livelihood in an uninterrupted manner. So, personal consumption binds the worker to capital, compels him to preserve capitalist exploitation. This is the essence of enslavement of hired labour. Comrade Enver Hoxha points out that in capitalism «the worker is not free, either in work or in life. He is a slave to the machine, to the capitalist and the technocrat, who squeeze out the last drop of his labour power and from this create surplus value for capital.»²

The current economic crisis has brought out the sharpness of the contradictory character of the theory on the «consumer society». Speculations about the high level of consumption and the fulfilment of needs, allegedly as the main aim of capitalist production, are now being replaced, on the part of the bourgeoisie, by the «arguments» on the necessity of reducing consumption by the working masses, as the «road» of healing the ulcers of capitalism. The ideologists of «anti-crisis» strive to show that it is the high and uncontrollable level of consumption which, in their opinion, begets the «over-demand» and, consequently, price rises, inflation, etc. In order to escape this evil they suggest that social funds should be curtailed, that wages be frozen, taxes increased, and so on. Therefore, now there is some talk about the «realization of the transition from the society of welfare to the society of limited consumption» (See «Economie et politique», Septembre 1980). However, even this cannot save the capitalist society from economic ca-

tastrophe, on the contrary it only serves to further aggravate all the contradictions of capitalism.

2.

The aggravation of all contradictions of capitalism and, especially, the frequent recurrence of economic crises led to the failure of the model of the capitalist consumer society. Speaking to the 8th Congress of the Party, Comrade Enver Hoxha emphasized, «With the present crisis, the model of capitalist 'consumer' society has received a crushing blow. The economic theories of present-day capitalism, spread and applied in all the big capitalist countries, and which inspired a number of revisionist countries in their economic reforms, have gone bankrupt along with it.»³

The technical-scientific revolution and intensified militarization of the economy account for the more frequent and deeper economic crises, which, unlike the former crises, have a destructive effect, thus further exacerbating the contradiction between production and consumption. The deviation from the normal cycle of development of the capitalist economy, the intensification of crises, the prolongation of the phase of fall and depression, the reduction of the phase of recovery and up-turn have made the economic crises more severe, more profound and with very grave consequences for the consumption by the working masses. The present crisis began after the prolonged period of depression during the second half of the '70s, without going through the phase of recovery and up-turn. The transition from depression to a new crisis and the outbreak of the crisis more or less at the same time all over the capitalist world, that is, its very broad extension which has made any manoeuvre on the world market virtually impossible, account for its still more destructive effect. We see a sharp fall of production, which has become a typical manifestation of the present crisis, everywhere. The war industry only knows no crisis. Yearly expenditure for armaments today are much higher than those made for education,

health and housing taken together. At a time when the expenditure for armaments in the big capitalist countries takes in more than 400 dollars per capita annually, more than one billion and a half people in the world live in absolutely miserable conditions.

As a result of this disproportionate development, of the unrestrained struggle for maximum profit by the monopolies, there is a recrudescence of the antagonistic contradictions between the new, historically imperative demands for the reproduction of labour power, which keeps growing, and the low level of their fulfilment, the real wages. The impoverishment of the proletariat and other working masses has an explanation precisely in this contradiction.

The development of productive forces and the growth of the social product have led to the broadening of the conventional circle of demands on the part of the proletariat. This development which relies on the exploitation of the proletariat, has led, among other things, to the intensification of work. The present-day system of organization of work in the capitalist and revisionist countries is so devised as to squeeze the maximum of the energy of the workers who operate the new technique. But the intensification of the process of work requires not only qualified labour power, but also a labour power that resists well to fatigue and monotony, which is able not only to cope with overwork, but is also quick to acquire new information and work habits. The workers' qualification and re-qualification, the raising of their educational and professional level, the improvement of their living conditions, the facilities in health services, etc., are objective demands of the developed capitalist production. In this manner, the regeneration of the working class in the conditions of a raised degree of intensification of work has necessarily led to the raising of demands for better complex food, for more appropriate living conditions, for the all-round development of transport, for a long and active recreation and rest. The problem of allowing more for the leisure of the working people has great importance at present. Lenin emphasized that the working people

and their families can preserve and develop their labour power only if they have the maximum possible leisure, otherwise, even if all the material goods necessary are granted, they will not be in a position to consume them in such a manner as to increase their capacity for work and to ensure their own reproduction. That is why this broadening of the demands of the proletariat at the present time is an objective process which is connected closely with the development of production, especially with the main element of the productive forces, the labour power.

Basing themselves on this fact, the modern revisionists admit that «the workers today live better than they did in the past», that «a broad range of goods has been introduced in their daily consumption and use», that «consumption by the population increases spontaneously» (See «Uchenija V.I. Lenina ob imperializme i sovremenost», p. 153). With this they negate the impoverishment of the proletariat. It is true that in the present-day conditions of the development of capitalism a broader range of goods enters the sphere of consumption in comparison with the last century, but this does not negate the existence and intensification of exploitation and impoverishment of the proletariat. This is because the basic demands of the proletariat for consumption and the very nature of consumption have an historical character. In the present-day conditions of development, the consumer goods used and the standard of living achieved, cannot be the same as those of 50 years ago, for example, otherwise the reproduction of the labour power in conformity with the demands of the present stage of development cannot be ensured. However in practice, in the present-day capitalist society, it happens that, whereas the basic demands of the proletariat keep growing objectively, the degree of their fulfilment, as against the level of the development of the productive forces, the possibilities created by social production, keep falling. In fact, the poor become still poorer, real wages continue to fall under the level of the value of the labour power, whereas the minimum cost of living rises

at more rapid rates. American statistics admit that, whereas at the end of the Second World War the real wages covered 80 per cent of the minimum livelihood necessary, this level in the USA today is just above 60 per cent.

The deep crises of capitalist production are accompanied with direct grave consequences for consumption by the working masses. In order to overcome the consequences of the economic crises, the bourgeoisie curtails the consumption by the working masses.

The fall of production and failure to exploit the productive capacities is accompanied with the increase of unemployment to proportions never seen before. The army of the unemployed now grows larger in all the phases of the economic cycle, even during the period of recovery and boom. In the developed capitalist countries the number of unemployed in 1981 was 23 million, and only one year after it increased to 32 million, that is 2.1 times more than in 1975. Reagan's big promises about an effort to reduce unemployment in the United States of America have been replaced by appeals to the workers to make new sacrifices.

But the high rates of the increase of population, especially the combination of this with inflation and price rises, have brought about the lowering of the standard of living and reduction of consumption per capita of working people. The American worker must pay now three times as much to buy the same amount of goods he bought in 1976. The great increases in prices for food-stuffs and energy have affected the families with low incomes and those with fixed incomes, especially the workers, pensioners and students. This phenomenon is the constant cause of the high rate increase of the number of people living under the recognized official level of poverty.

The bourgeois state is continuously playing an active role in the curtailment of the consumption by the working people. Apart from the efforts to suppress the strikes and demonstrations, many capitalist states have recourse to the policy of «wage freezes» and cutting down on social funds, a

a time when inflation and prices keep rising rapidly. In the '80s the main capitalist countries, like the USA, Britain, the Federal Republic of Germany, and other countries, adopted various programs for drastic cuts of social funds, while at the same time, making increased expenditure for the industry of war. Obviously, the cuts on funds means reduction of real incomes and consumption per head of the working people. The working masses find difficulties in coping with the growing cost of health services, education, etc. Health service in the capitalist and revisionist countries has become a source of real anguish for the working people and their families. Tariffs for health services in the USA increase at rates double the increase of the cost of living.

Consumption by the working people in the capitalist countries is threatened, to a great extent, by the heavy burden of taxes. The worker grapples with a lot of direct and indirect taxes. He must pay for everything and in everything. If before the Second World War the American worker paid one sixth of his income for taxes, now he must pay 60 per cent of it. Forecasts put the total amount of taxes to be paid by the American citizens at about 296 billion dollars.

3.

The efforts of the bourgeoisie to increase internal consumption through credits for consumption goods ended up in failure and further aggravated the contradictions between production and consumption. Soon after its implementation, this practice of false and wholly artificial raising of the level of consumption for the working people resulted in the worsening of their situation.

In the beginning of the '60s a new practice, that of granting credits for the purchase of consumer goods, especially hardware, was widely practised. This kind of trade was promoted allegedly in order to fulfil the needs of the working people and for their good. It was publicized as the application in practice of the model of «consumer society», in which the con-

sumption by the working people would be raised through money obtained in credits. In fact consumption credits emerged from the deepening of the contradiction between production and consumption, from the growing difficulties in the realization of broad consumption goods as a result of the fall of the purchasing power of the working masses.

Trade on credit, through its mechanism, secures for the capitalist not only a relatively greater realization of goods, but also the further increase of profits for themselves. As the working masses are unable to secure the means of consumption they need for their livelihood from their incomes, they are compelled to use the credits which the capitalists offer them, to take money at interest, in spite of the fact that the interest rates are high, or that it is given in conditions unfavourable for the working class. The workers' debts and obligations to the banks and institutions of credit have increased at very high rates. Buying goods on credit binds the working people hand and foot to the capitalist firms. The consumption credit compels the worker to spend in advance a great part of the incomes he secures from his hired labour. And when he fails to pay the instalments as prescribed, the goods he has bought on credit are seized by the force of law. The system of trade on credit has become in fact an open means for the supplementary exploitation of the working people, a means of exploitation which has a predatory and humiliating character.

Practice has shown that the extension of the consumption credit was transformed into a factor that deepened the economic crisis. By artificially raising the purchasing power of the working people, this system created a great disproportion between the debts and real incomes of the working people. In the '80s the rate of the increase of consumers' debts to the creditors exceeded the rates of the increase of the real incomes of the working people fourfold. This situation led to the artificial and temporary increase of internal production, which created the conditions for the crisis of overproduction. The sale of goods on credit created a si-

tuation in which commodity production exceeded the real demand and the purchasing power of the working people. As Comrade Enver Hoxha has pointed out, «This proved in practice that the stimulation of production through the artificial increase of internal consumption, making all the people indebted to the monopolies, was fraught with disastrous consequences for the whole country.»⁴

The great increase of credits for consumption goods, which simply means an artificial increase of demand, became the factor that stimulated inflation, which, in turn, led to the growing cost of the credit, that is, the increase of the interest rate on money capital. But the raising of interest rates urged the capitalists to place their money in the banks, especially the American banks, in order to secure high returns, instead of using capital for production. As a result of this in the capitalist countries we see an unwillingness to making capital investments and a fall of extended reproduction, which, in turn, give rise to increased unemployment and prices.

The «consumer society» did not create a new class of consumers, nor did it deproletarianize the capitalist society, as the bourgeois ideologists claimed with great publicity. On the contrary, by intensifying the exploitation of the working people, it polarized it still more. In the conditions of fierce competition, the small producers are going bankrupt in ever greater numbers, thus swelling the ranks of the proletarians. If in the '50s the part of the hired working people to the population of the developed capitalist countries was less than 70 per cent, today it occupies 80 per cent of it. Compared with the middle of the last century, the number of hired workers has increased by scores of times.

However, this process has led to the further exacerbation of contradictions between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie and the extension of the struggle of the working class against capital. The workers have risen in strikes, have come out in the streets and dropped tools not because of the blessings which the consumer society guarantees for

them, but because their work and living have become a burden, because capital is merciless, and has transformed them into mere instruments. They fight to defend their standard of living, against the consequences of the economic crisis, in order to shake its burden off their backs. All this has caused the exposure and failure of the myth about the «consumer society». Meanwhile, the bourgeoisie, along with its stale propaganda, is having more and more recourse to violence against the proletariat. Most different forms of violence are used against the participants in demonstrations and strikes.

4.

In the example of the «consumer society» of the West, much noise and great promises were made about raising the well-being of the working people, about increasing goods of broad consumption and foods in the revisionist countries. In the Soviet Union, when Khrushchev and his group usurped power, they tried to create the impression that they were creating abundance, that they were about to gorge the market. Khrushchev's «guliash socialism» promised to create a well-being never seen before for the working people. The example of the USA became the ideal of the Khrushchevites and of all modern revisionists. After the '60s the revisionist propaganda began to produce arguments that allegedly the law of the priority development of the production of the means of production had lost its power, that now allegedly the time had come to give priority to the development of the production of consumer goods. Indeed, the 24th congress of the revisionist Communist Party of the Soviet Union was called the congress of «consumption».

But the capitalist road of the development of the economy led the Soviet Union and the other revisionist countries up into more and more fierce crises. The economy of these countries in the beginning of the '80s was in degradation and crisis. In this way, the increase of industrial production in the Soviet Union in 1982 was 4-5 times less than in

the '50s. There is a great shortage of goods of broad consumption, especially of agricultural products and foods, on the market.

The Khrushchevite reforms in agriculture created a situation in which the Soviet agriculture «harvests the wheat sown in the fields of America». Millions of tons of wheat fail to be produced and must be imported from abroad. The shortage of basic products to feed the people has led to the policy of tightening the belts, rationing, price rises. The establishment of rationing cards for broad consumer goods is a reality not only in Poland, but also in the Soviet Union and other revisionist countries. In fact, the working people consume less than the strict minimum of livelihood.

The «consumer society» revealed its falseness more openly still in Yugoslavia which tried to build this society with the aid of foreign capital. With the billions of dollars Tito obtained as credit from the USA and other capitalist countries, he wanted to create the illusion of abundance. But «the external pompous appearances, the misleading advertisements of a 'well-being such as can be found in no other place' (!), of a 'Yugoslavia of freedom and abundance' (!) have left the place to all-round crisis, poverty and growing unemployment, galloping inflation, increasing shortages of even the most essential goods and articles of broad consumption, etc.»⁵

The only fact that the level of credits per capita in Yugoslavia is greater than the national per capita income created within the country, reveals its catastrophic situation. Yugoslavia, as the Titoite revisionists admit with their own mouths, is one of the first countries of the world that consumes more than it is able to create in terms of the social product and national incomes, that is, a country which consumes more than its economic power allows. The artificial increase of consumption through great credits received from foreign capital has paralysed the economy. The situation has reached the point in which Yugoslavia is on the verge of a moratorium, that is, of putting its national interests up for auction.

The «self-administrative» system

failed. In the conditions when the branches of the Yugoslav economy function only on 16 per cent of their means of circulation, the reproduction of the Yugoslav economy demands, to a great extent, on the situation on the foreign markets, and on «aid» and capital from the West and the East. The empty boasting about the raising of the standard of living on money obtained on credit, has grown threadbare. Yugoslavia has one of the highest figures of unemployment in Europe, affecting 14 per cent of the able-bodied population of the country. Inflation is growing rapidly, while the prices for consumer goods are 2-3 times as high as two years before. Consumption credits, in the example of the «consumer society», has put the Yugoslav working people deep in debts, so much so that parents leave them to their children to pay, after they die.

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The grave economic crisis buried the model of the capitalist «consumer society». The «consumer society» was unable to quell the class struggle of the proletariat. On the contrary, the exacerbation of contradictions, the rise in the political, class consciousness of the proletariat, as Comrade Enver Hoxha pointed out at the 8th Congress of the PLA, «are making it conscious that it can escape oppression and exploitation only through class struggle, only through revolution.»⁶

1 K. Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, book 3, p. 19, Alb. ed.

2 Enver Hoxha, «Eurocommunism Is Anti-communism», p. 120, Eng. ed.

3 Enver Hoxha, *Report to the 8th Congress of the PLA*, p. 180, Eng. ed.

4 Enver Hoxha, *Address before the Electors*, November 1982, p. 4, Alb. ed.

5 Enver Hoxha, «The Titoites», p. 631, Eng. ed.

6 Enver Hoxha, *Report to the 8th Congress of the PLA*, p. 175, Eng. ed.