They Sell Us Our Own Rebellion: Capitalism and the Commodification of Resistance

The Slow Burning Fuse

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Rebellion has never been more fashionable. From corporate diversity statements quoting Angela Davis to boutique brands advertising "resistance" in ethically sourced cotton, capitalism appears to have absorbed its own critique. While the spectre of revolution once terrified the bourgeoisie it has now been domesticated into aesthetic, identity, and lifestyle.

This strange inversion, where opposition to capitalism becomes one of its most lucrative industries, reflects what Michel Clouscard in the 1980s termed le capitalisme de la séduction. A capitalism that no longer represses desire but commodifies it. Once the system had achieved material abundance under U.S. hegemony, Clouscard argued, it could replace discipline with indulgence, repression with stimulation. The new consumer society no longer required obedience, rather it required self-expression. The result was what he called libéralisme libertaire, or the fusion of economic liberalism and moral libertinism into a single ideological order.

Capitalism's capacity to integrate and monetise critique has transformed the meaning of resistance itself. The contemporary left must reclaim rebellion from its commodified form by rebuilding collective, material practices of solidarity outside the marketplace.

In The Communist Manifesto Marx and Engels foresaw capitalism's capacity to dissolve the very social relations that sustained it when they wrote "All that is solid melts into air." What they could not have predicted was capitalism's ability to liquefy even the language of its own critique. The postwar transformation of the Western left from a politics of class struggle to a politics of identity and culture was not accidental. As Clouscard noted, this was the ideological corollary of a new phase of accumulation. When the factory ceased to be the primary site of exploitation, the market colonised subjectivity itself. Desire, sexuality, and self-expression, once imagined as sources of liberation, became new territories for profit.

Guy Debord, writing in The Society of the Spectacle, diagnosed this metamorphosis with uncanny precision – "The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation mediated by images." What once constituted lived resistance became representation, a commodity among commodities. Today, capitalism thrives not despite critique but through it. The aesthetic of rebellion, radical art, progressive advertising, social media outrage, becomes a renewable source of profit. Each protest slogan is a potential marketing opportunity; every subculture, a future consumer demographic. The result is what we might call the spectacularisation of dissent. Political

struggle is translated into imagery, emptied of economic content, and fed back to the public as moral consumption. The message of collective emancipation is replaced by the mantra of personal authenticity.

Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony remains essential for understanding this process. Power, he observed, persists not merely through coercion but through the manufacture of consent and the ability of ruling classes to shape the moral and intellectual order of society. The cultural Cold War exemplified this mechanism. Under the guise of anti-totalitarianism, the United States actively cultivated a non-communist left centred on civil liberties rather than class struggle. Foundations, cultural institutions, and media networks promoted a liberal humanism that celebrated freedom and creativity, precisely the values that could be reconciled with market expansion.

In this ideological terrain, the radical became respectable. The revolutionary vocabulary of Marxism was replaced by the therapeutic idiom of self-realisation. The collective subject of labour gave way to the expressive individual. As Clouscard put it, "Freedom without labour is the luxury of the consumer, not the emancipation of the producer." This liberalisation of critique allowed capitalism to appear humane, tolerant, and self-correcting, a system capable of endless reform rather than structural transformation. The contradictions of capital were displaced onto secondary terrains – race, gender, and identity became sites of recognition rather than redistribution.

While these struggles remain vital, their institutionalisation within the liberal state has often served to neutralise their revolutionary potential. As Marx warned in his Critique of the Gotha Programme, "Rights can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development conditioned thereby." The triumph of "awareness" without material change is the hallmark of this new moral economy.

If the market aestheticised rebellion, the university bureaucratised it. Radical thought, once born of revolutionary movements, became a professional discipline. Critical theory, feminism, postcolonialism, and queer studies all emerged from struggles against domination. Yet in the neoliberal academy, they have been domesticated. Herbert Marcuse, writing in One-Dimensional Man, warned that advanced capitalism would "integrate its own negation." The university has become the institutional expression of that integration. It rewards critique that critiques everything except the conditions of its own reproduction. The university lecturer who lectures on Marx while precariously employed embodies the contradiction perfectly. Students are trained to deconstruct oppression but not to dismantle it. Radical texts circulate as commodities within an intellectual marketplace governed by citation metrics and branding. This does not render theory useless, but it exposes the necessity of reconnecting intellectual work with political praxis. Without organisation, critique becomes a career rather than a weapon. As Bakunin wrote, "The urge to destroy is also a creative urge," but only when destruction clears the ground for collective creation.

The traditional Marxist critique of capitalism focused on exploitation, the extraction of surplus value from labour. Clouscard extended this analysis to what he called the colonisation of subjectivity. Under the capitalism of seduction, consumption replaces production as the primary site of social control. Adorno and Horkheimer anticipated this shift in their discussion of the culture industry, which manufactures pseudo-needs to sustain endless consumption. Where early capitalism demanded asceticism, late capitalism demands indulgence. The worker is no longer disciplined through scarcity but pacified through pleasure. Freedom itself becomes commodified. "Be yourself" is the most effective slogan of contemporary domination, for it aligns personal lib-

eration with consumer choice. The rebellion of the 1960s, sexual, cultural, and aesthetic, was thus repurposed as the emotional infrastructure of neoliberalism.

In this world, repression is unnecessary. The subject internalises capitalism's imperatives as self-expression. The pursuit of authenticity becomes the engine of profit. As Clouscard observed, "Capitalism needs its false opposition." Rebellion, commodified, becomes the lubricant of accumulation.

The digital era has intensified this dynamic. Social media transforms activism into a performance measured in clicks, shares, and follows. Outrage circulates faster than organisation; visibility replaces victory. Debord's spectacle has become participatory. We are all actors now, curating our political identities in real time. The system no longer hides oppression; rather it amplifies it because outrage drives engagement, and engagement drives revenue. This is not to dismiss online activism. Platforms can amplify marginalised voices and coordinate real struggles. But when the metrics of attention replace the metrics of power, politics collapses into entertainment. The danger is that rebellion becomes a brand, one that offers catharsis without consequence. The protester becomes an influencer, the strike becomes a story, and capitalism remains unscathed.

If rebellion has been commodified, the task of the left is to rebuild it as a material practice rather than an aesthetic. Authentic resistance cannot be purchased, because it refuses the logic of ownership itself. Anarchist traditions have long provided blueprints for this renewal. Kropotkin's concept of mutual aid describes cooperation as the evolutionary and moral basis of human survival. Mutual aid networks, community kitchens, and worker cooperatives embody a form of socialism grounded in direct action rather than state mediation. Similarly, Bakunin's insistence that "freedom without socialism is privilege and injustice; socialism without freedom is slavery and brutality" reminds us that emancipation must be both collective and voluntary. These principles offer an antidote to commodified rebellion. Solidarity, unlike charity or "allyship," cannot be monetised. It entails risk, sacrifice, and shared struggle. It is built not through awareness campaigns but through the concrete organisation of daily life such as union organising, and local resistance to capitalist extraction. Every act that reclaims production, distribution, or care from the market is revolutionary. In the words of Marx, it is through such acts that the self-changing of people coincides with their changing of circumstances.

To resist the capitalism of seduction, we must cultivate what the Situationists called the realisation of art into everyday life, the transformation of creativity from commodity to common good. The true rebellion of the 21st century lies not in aesthetic transgression but in the creation of autonomous spaces where people can live free from market mediation. The commune, the squat, the cooperative, and the federation are not nostalgic forms; they are laboratories for a post-capitalist future. These spaces resist the logic of seduction by making life itself the site of politics. They embody what Clouscard called the conquest of consciousness through pleasure, but inverted – pleasure reclaimed from profit, desire liberated from consumption, freedom redefined as collective autonomy.

Capitalism's genius lies in its ability to sell us our own discontent. It markets the appearance of freedom while deepening dependence. The left's task is not to refine critique within this system but to build forms of life that render it obsolete. To reclaim rebellion, we must sever its link to consumption. Revolution will not be televised, branded, or algorithmically boosted. It will be lived in cooperation, in risk, in solidarity. The challenge, as ever, is to turn critique into creation. As Marx wrote "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it."

Today, to change the world means refusing to let the market sell it back to us piece by piece – including our own rebellion.

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