

*Feeding the Hand that Bites Us  
In Defence of Lifestyle Politics*

*Matt Wilson*

*a fingerhand publication, anti-copyright, 2012*

## **Introduction**

From vegan punks eating out of skips to middle-class liberals buying their organic avocados in Waitrose, there are plenty of stereotypes that spring to mind when the topic of lifestyle politics is raised. Yet curiously, the question of how (or if) lifestyle politics can play a serious part in creating radical social change is rarely discussed; within the world of radical politics and activism, our lifestyles are skirted around like a weighty elephant in the middle of the room which everyone does their best to ignore. At times the elephant gets trodden on, and emotionally charged discussions flare up, but these are rarely productive exchanges. Beyond that, there appears to be no common understanding of what lifestyle politics might really mean. Is it really just about buying fair trade coffee and organic vegetables, as it is so often presented? Or does it go much deeper and further than that?

Whilst there may well be real disagreement over the value of lifestyle politics then, I believe there is mostly confusion about its theory and practice. As a result,

when there are debates around its merits, and what the term even means, they tend to be unproductive, as people argue at cross-purposes, often focusing on simplistic stereotypes to make their case. I hope to show that lifestyle politics are a vital tool in creating radical social change, and to respond to the many criticisms against it. Whilst some of these criticisms are based on a superficial understanding of lifestyle politics, others must be listened to carefully, and the concerns they raise must be addressed. I will respond to these criticisms below, but first and foremost, it seems necessary to provide a reasonably comprehensive sketch of what lifestyle politics is all about, or what it *could* be all about.

### *A definition of lifestyle politics...*

Lifestyle politics is based on the idea that social change can only occur if individuals begin to change their own lives – the way they think and the way they act. This is not the only way that social change must be created, but it is a necessary element of any profound and radical attempt to escape our current political, economic, cultural and ethical status quo. What this means in practice will be explored more below, but first let's look at the two central theoretical pillars on which lifestyle politics rests.

Firstly, fundamental changes in our lifestyles are ultimately going to be necessary; the sooner we start to change our lives, and doing so of our own choosing, the better our chances will be of creating and defending a transition to a just, peaceful and sustainable world. Our current lifestyles are dependent on a complex physical network of roads, factories, mines, airports, machines, oil-fields, forests, animals and people (and much more besides). Even the seemingly

virtual world of the internet is embedded in a staggering mass of energy and materials. Parts of the computer I'm now writing on were probably assembled by children working in appalling conditions. The energy powering it is polluting something, somewhere. This is true and it will always be true. A post-scarcity world, filled with all the paraphernalia of modern life but without the human or environmental cost, is simply not possible. Technology cannot and will not find answers that allow us to continue living the way so many of us in the west currently live. If we want to maintain our current lifestyles, then the planet will suffer, and large numbers of people will need to keep working as little more than slaves. No matter what political arrangement we may manage to invoke, no matter what just and democratic economic system we might succeed in creating, the limits of time, space and resources mean that we could never equalise the material wealth so many of us now take for granted. If we want to drink coffee every day in Manchester, or upgrade our computer every two or three years, or drive our car to the out-of-town supermarket, then we need to keep burning (and securing sources of) cheap oil, to have few or no constraints on pollution (at least in parts of the world), to have a steady workforce of literally billions forced into working for virtually no pay in appalling conditions. If we oppose state capitalism, and seek its ultimate destruction, then we are going to need to accept that we must give up a great many of the luxuries (and banalities) that it currently provides.

Secondly, this physical reality is deeply caught up within the way we think about the world. Our cultural, political, and ethical views both inform and are informed by the physical world and by the way we act within it. Every time we step out of our house straight into a car, and drive to a supermarket to be served by an anonymous cashier who hates his job, we re-enforce our isolation from our wider

community. Every time we buy vegetables flown from the other side of the world, or upgrade our phone because we're bored with our old one, we strengthen our dependency on an unjust and unsustainable economy. We let the state tell us what we can and can't do and obey the logic of capitalism, readily letting go of the small amount of power that we do in fact have, despite the ever-present weight of the state. True, we might at times break the law, but we could also reverse this logic, and refuse to do things that the state allows. If we could choose how the world would look, it would not be built on exploitation of people and the planet, yet when corporations and states exploit them, we accept the benefits that come from this. We wouldn't ask or demand that a child work for a dollar a day to make our shoes, but if Nike is going to make that happen, then we buy the shoes all the same. Lifestyle politics recognizes the need to free ourselves from the logic of state-capitalism, to create new ways to interact with our world. However powerless we may be to change the entire system, it suggests the need to take responsibility for our actions as and when we can. In doing so, we cease to be the mindless, atomised consumer that we are expected to be, and we begin to define for ourselves how we ought to live. We are socially fragmented, we have become obsessed with consumption, we demand more and more choice. This is not our fault, and we must not make the mistake of seeing this as a failure that we should be ashamed of. But we must recognise that the way we live, the way we think and act, is to a great extent moulded by state-capitalism; more importantly, we must recognise that we can begin to break free.

Lifestyle politics then is about reducing our environmental impact on the planet right now, but perhaps more than that, it is about recognising the complex ways in which we are all connected to and benefit from a system of organisation (state-capitalism) which we seek to overthrow. Our needs and desires, and even many of

our political and ethical values and assumptions, are defined and nourished by a system which we reject; if we reject the system, then we need to begin rejecting the life it has created for us.

### *The Scope of Lifestyle Politics...*

So how does lifestyle politics help us do these things? Can we really live outside of the system? Isn't there the danger that we will simply be making capitalism and the state appear more acceptable, and that we will strengthen the view that we have the freedom and choice to live however we want?

In fact, lifestyle politics is not about living outside of the system, but about creating new logics, habits, spaces, opportunities and physical realities within it, always building and building, expanding and expanding, more and more, until, maybe one day, we have hollowed out the system entirely. By attempting to pursue a life we have defined for ourselves, we demonstrate that we could live differently if there was sufficient will. We expose the mantra that *there is no alternative* for the lie that it is. And, when we struggle to create those alternatives, when we bump up against the structural and cultural barriers of our world – when we find ourselves unable to get rid of the car because we need to travel too far for work, for example – we are reminded of how far we still have to go, and are encouraged to strive for ever more radical change. It won't always be easy, and what we do will always be in some ways partial and compromised, but changing the world was never going to be an easy ride.

Of course, some people may feel that all that is needed of them to make the world a better place is to buy the odd green or fair-trade product, and they may have no intention or desire to radically transform state capitalism. And they may or may

not choose to see these minor, surface changes to their lives as lifestyle politics. But that doesn't matter. The real question is, can lifestyle politics, understood in a particular way, go beyond this? Can it offer the possibility of change usually considered to be available only by the use of more confrontational means?

For me, the answers to these questions are a categorical *yes*. Lifestyle politics can and must be viewed as a comprehensive approach to social change, which takes account of multiple factors and which seeks to eventually transform not only the individual's life, but the lives of every one. Lifestyle politics stands in opposition to the superficial lifestyle changes offered us by magazines and corporations; put simply, it is not about *style*, it is about *life*. It is about profound, far-reaching change, and it is about trying to take new steps in the right direction all the time. It is not just about changing the way we shop from time to time, but about engaging with, thinking about, and often changing, every element that makes up our day-to-day life.

One of the most obvious, but most over-looked, elements of lifestyle is not about simply buying different products, but about consuming (or at least buying) *less*. Ethical shopping, in other words, doesn't begin and end with buying green products, but entails a rethinking of which things we actually need to buy and consume in the first place. Rather than ethical *consumerism*, then, we might want to think about ethical *consumption*, a significant element of which is drastically reducing the amount of stuff we fill our lives with. But of course, we do need certain things to live, such as food and shelter, and, because lifestyle politics is not about some puritanical cult of self-denial, it is important to stress that we will also want to have things in our lives which are not essential to existence, but which make our lives happier and fuller; art, new clothes, alcohol, holidays, and

so on. Starting off by questioning the extent we need these things, we can then go on to ask how we might provide for them in better ways, as and when we feel the need for them. Can we share a camera between a group of friends, can we make and share art ourselves, or support local artists; can we take our holidays closer to home, and explore our own back yard rather than insisting on always visiting a new city in Europe; can we repair or swap old clothes, and so on. We can take steps to start producing and creating a great many of the things we currently buy; from beer to culture to vegetables, from bike trailers to furniture to clothes - we can grow, make, swap, co-own and borrow a host of things that are currently seen as being mere products which are to be not only consumed, but also bought and individually owned. Many small, simple steps can result in a massive reduction of our reliance on capitalist-produced, unsustainable tat.

As well as considering what we buy, we must also consider where and how we buy it; driving to Sainsbury's to buy vegan sausages will do little to change the world, but walking or cycling to our local independent whole food shop has many positive consequences.

Our place of work, and where we live, can also become part of our daily struggles. Although it is not always possible, there are numerous options for working and living in ways which begin to challenge the conventional wisdom of the workplace and of the home. Housing and workers' co-ops are obvious examples, but even when these are not possible, we can take small steps to reclaiming these crucial elements of our lives; workers might go on the occasional, union sanctioned strike, but we can also challenge our bosses on a daily basis and refuse to allow their corporate logic to go unchallenged. The way we travel is another obvious feature of daily life. Cycling or walking not only reduces our environmental impact, locally and globally; much more importantly, it can have a dramatic effect on how we engage with our community.

There's also the question of challenging many of the social norms that permeate our lives; a classic example of this would be thinking about the way women are treated and viewed. Many reasonable people (male and female) who would never dream of offering a consciously patriarchal opinion nonetheless play out all manner of such values in their daily lives without even realising it. For example, how often can we witness women in meetings being ignored whilst male speakers are listened to avidly? There is no shame in admitting that we are all vulnerable to learning from our society – human life couldn't be any other way; so it is no surprise that, even when we consciously reject our society's culture, we still embody many of its values in our unconscious thoughts and actions. So lifestyle is also about actively challenging this area of our lives.

Ultimately, then, lifestyle politics is concerned with the creation of a new world, a new way of thinking and being. It is about shaping new physical and social realities that may one day grow to the point that they drown out the old ones. Far from being a vague, naïve and piecemeal approach to social change, lifestyle politics is deeply rooted in the idea of *prefiguration*, a political strategy which receives increasing support, but which, I believe, is often too much focused on the spectacle of *activism*. Understood more coherently and consistently, prefiguration becomes synonymous with a politics of daily life.

## **Prefiguration**

Prefiguration, a long-standing principle of anarchists, and, increasingly, a notion supported by many other radicals, is the idea that we should always use *means* that are consistent with our *ends*. For example, we can't use authoritarian means – such as the hierarchical state – if our desired end is a free and horizontal world. In



a similar vein, prefiguration is the idea that we should start to create the world we want here and now, and not wait until some distant revolution. Now, radicals talk about prefiguration all the time, yet all too often this amounts to a narrowly focused interest in organising summit protests and smaller direct actions in a horizontal way; organising a temporary autonomous zone using consensus is thus seen to be prefiguring a radical alternative, and, of course, it does do this. But surely it also makes sense to start organising our daily lives in this way, to start living as much as is possible in ways that start building up alternatives to the capitalist state's way of social organisation. Organising an action using consensus helps people learn about and engage with methods of direct democracy, but is this enough if what is being worked towards is just one more lock-on or occupation? Real attempts to build a new society in the shell of the old mean widening the horizons of action to encompass the day-to-day realities of life – where we work, what we eat, how we engage with others around us, and so on. Interestingly, whilst skipping (dumpster-diving) is commonly understood to be the classic lifestylist act, there is little prefigurative value in it; in fact, it simply creates a new form of reliance on the excesses of consumerism. Lifestyle politics is not just about shopping, but neither is capitalism. Capitalism also shapes the way we come to think, so when we engage so directly with it, even if there is no financial transaction, we are still living on its terms. This isn't to say that discarded food shouldn't be used, especially for projects such as Food Not Bombs, but the understanding of lifestyle politics I want to defend here suggests that creating positive alternatives – farming and foodstore cooperatives, for example - is far more productive.

So lifestyle politics is essentially prefiguration, and prefiguration without lifestyle is at best partial; prefiguration that focuses on high-impact actions helps maintain

the illusion that politics is something that exists *out there*. True, it takes politics out of Westminster or the White House, but it keeps it separate from our every day life; it maintains the very division that prefigurations is supposed to break down. In a truly democratic world, *politics* would be indistinguishable from what each of us does in our daily lives.

Yet, so often, prefiguration continues to be seen as distinct from our daily lives, and lifestyle continues to be viewed negatively by many. I hope that in padding out the ideas behind lifestyle I have demonstrated it has a radical potential, but I now need to counter some of the claims made which suggest otherwise.

### **Criticisms of Lifestyle Politics:**

#### *The Preserve of the Middle-Class...*

One of the most common criticisms against lifestyle is that it is a tool only available to certain sections of society – namely, those with enough money to afford more expensive ethical products. Although it's always important to remember the disabling and divisive nature of our economic system, this criticism doesn't really stand up to scrutiny, for a number of reasons.

Firstly, as we've already seen, much of lifestyle is about consuming *less*, as well as doing other things, like walking instead of driving, which save money.

Recently, a friend of mine got a new mobile phone, and explained that she gets one every six months as part of her package. She could easily get a different package, or simply refuse the phone, telling her phone company she thought it was an unjustifiable waste of resources. Neither of these would have cost her more money. Lifestyle politics means thinking about all these little elements of our daily lives and seeing how and when we can disrupt the usual flow of capitalist

logic, how and when we can refuse to play their game. Often, that results in saving money.

Of course, some green products can be more expensive than their conventional counter-parts, but there are a number of responses to this. Firstly, the idea that supermarkets are cheap is a myth perpetuated by the supermarkets themselves, and it is a sad irony that many radicals often happily repeat this myth; whilst some products in supermarkets are sold at below cost price, this is done to entice people into the stores, and many of the other products are as expensive, if not more so, than similar products sold in other, smaller shops. Similarly, the logic of supermarkets is one of scale, and they encourage us to buy larger quantities of products than is necessary – and often, these additional purchases end up being wasted (Britons throw away about one third of the food they buy). Shopping in larger supermarkets also usually entails traveling by car, and getting rid of the car is one way to save a huge amount of money every year.

We also need to consider the admittedly difficult question of whether we can really justify our consumption habits; there is often a great deal of resistance to the idea that working class people should make sacrifices, when their lives are often hard enough as they are. But if we believe in a fairer world, radicals need to ask themselves how much longer we can justify enjoying the benefits we in the west receive. Why should people be given a green card to buy (and throw away) whatever they want, however it is made, just because they are worse off than others in their society? Is it really fair that less wealthy westerners should help themselves to many of the luxuries that global capitalism offers them, simply because there are some people who have even more? Can we, in other words, really justify maintaining the lifestyles we in the west lead? I don't think we can, whatever our social and economic situation, and I think if we're ever going to

challenge capitalism, we need to be prepared to resist the temptations of its carrots, as well as fighting against its sticks.

People are happy enough to condemn people for voting for the BNP, for using racist language, and so on, yet when it comes to how they spend their money, we become scared of appearing authoritarian or condescending. But in refusing to critique the way we in the west spend our money, we simply re-enforce the capitalist, liberal logic of the sovereign rights of the consumer. Somehow, the notion of our liberty to buy whatever we want remains deeply ingrained even in the minds of ardent anti-capitalists. But is the freedom to shop 'til we drop really a freedom? And don't we have the freedom to at least constructively assess the way people currently consume?

We also need to be a little more honest in asking the extent to which such arguments gain their apparent strength because they let us off the hook, allowing many people who could quite easily make many lifestyle changes to feel justified in not doing so. If some people genuinely are socially or economically unable to alter their lives, does this really mean those that are not so restricted should just sit back and do nothing? Many people can not engage in illegal activities, or dangerous actions, or whatever; not all tactics must be available to everyone in equal measures; and the more those who are in a position to live differently do so, the easier it will become for others to eventually do likewise.

*Lifestyle is Moral Authoritarianism...*

The fear of judging people's spending habits taps into a wider fear of moral interference. Lifestyle politics, for many, represents a form of moral intrusion,

because it explicitly highlights the acts of individuals and makes a judgment about those acts. Interestingly, once again this very much fits with a liberal capitalist logic where the individual is seen as somehow separate from society; their moral choices are thus viewed as a private affair. But one of the critiques of liberal capitalism is that this view is simply wrong; we are all connected in multiple ways, and our actions have an impact on other people's lives. It's interesting that people start wringing their hands when some one says people shouldn't drive cars – how dare they tell other people what to do – yet they rarely stop to reflect on the fact that people driving cars prohibits all sorts of people doing all sort of things. In other words, if we verbally condemn an action, we're seen as interfering, but if we physically prevent some one else from doing so – stopping children cycling by driving our cars – then we're just getting on with our lives. This is perhaps one of the biggest myths pedaled out by liberal-capitalist logic, and it's not surprising, because it helps protect the status quo; but it's sad that so many radicals have failed to see that if we shy away from critiquing some actions, we simply allow other actions to continue.

It is also true that we do in fact moral judgments all the time; we condemn bankers and war-mongerers and racists; it is dangerous to believe that we are committed to absolute moral diversity, when evidently we are not. What we need to do is to learn how to deal with behaviours and beliefs which we disagree with without relying on authoritarian means to simply destroy them. Engaging in lifestyle politics gives us scope to consider and practice how best to do this.

### *The Risk of Co-option and the Limits to Change...*

One undeniable problem with lifestyle politics is that the reality of our world is one which makes even minor deviations from the usual lifestyles extremely hard,

and when we do try to make such changes, there is always the risk that such efforts will simply be recuperated. We only need to consider the frequent but banal use of Che Guevara's image to see just how easily capitalism can co-opt revolutionary sentiments. Or, can it? Corporations may be able to make a living by selling Che t-shirts, but if we are talking about creating profound changes to the way we think and act, and if we engage with the possibility of doing so in increasingly consistent and challenging ways, then it becomes less clear how and if capitalist logic can co-opt such shifts. Of course, the market place is skewed in favour of large, ruthless corporations; the state uses various methods, some explicit, some less so, to punish those who try to forge alternative lives; even the inanimate world of concrete and metal pushes us to behave in ways we would rather not: and yet, difficult though these barriers are to overcome, there are an infinite number of inspiring examples of people genuinely working towards a different way of living. The image of a communist revolutionary may be easily co-optable, but wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with his image does not constitute lifestyle politics. A superficial understanding of lifestyle is vulnerable to such criticisms then, because it remains embedded within a capitalist logic and seeks no more than surface changes; a more far-reaching politics of daily life goes way beyond this, and as and when the state or market attempts to co-opt these practices, we are able to understand and expose such interference for what it is. Corporations may be able to make products that appear to be green, or worker friendly, but a consistent approach to lifestyle would see that this is no solution and refuse to be satisfied with such meagre offerings.

Of course, this does not mean that there are not real concerns about the extent to which we have scope to create and maintain alternatives to state-capitalism, but any radical attempts to alter the world are bound to be met with considerable resistance. If the state's capacity to punish us when we lock ourselves to the

entrance to a bank does not deter us from taking such actions, why should the potential for some lifestyle tactics to meet with similar resistance pose such a fatal blow? And, the more we understand that lifestyle politics is about making *fundamental* changes, and the more support it receives, the less vulnerable it becomes to such interference. We must always remain alert to these concerns, then, but they do not ultimately negate the worth of adopting a politics of lifestyle.

### *Lifestyle and the Liberal Individual...*

Another criticism of lifestyle which can be overcome, but which needs to be acknowledged and reflected upon, is the extent to which it feeds into liberal ideas of individualism and identity. Capitalism sells us the idea that we are sovereign individuals, that we are in charge of our lives... but only as atomised consumers. We can create our own identities, but only through the purchasing of products which define who we are. Minority cultures thus become new sources of capitalist expansion, as witnessed by the emergence of the pink pound, for example, where the gay culture was brought into the market place and quickly commodified. The same thing happened with punk, of course. As Penny Rimbaud, singer with the seminal band Crass, put it; CBS promoted the Clash...but not for revolution, just for cash. And now more and more companies are getting wise to the green pound, and it is easy to see how concerned individuals are sold the dream of maintaining their current lifestyles by making only minor changes; a green car, organic bananas, biodegradable phones...

Whilst our identities are important, we must not lose sight of our wider engagement with our communities, and indeed with the rest of the world. Lifestyle politics is not about forging a new type of atomised individual, or a new

cultural minority that can happily co-exist with capitalism; it is about forging links and networks, breaking down barriers and connecting to diverse groups of people. Whilst it is each of us, as individuals, who must make the choice to change our lives, when we do so, we will only be effective if we make such changes together.

### *Taking Lifestyle Politics Forward...*

There are other ways in which lifestyle politics might be challenged, but the strength of these criticisms (as well as those discussed above) is maintained only if and when lifestyle is understood in a superficial way. As I mentioned earlier, some people do believe a few minor changes to their lives are sufficient, but all political tactics are open to multiple (and even conflicting) interpretations. Understood in a comprehensive way, however, lifestyle politics is capable of responding to these concerns.

Lifestyle is about reflecting on everything you do in a politicised way; it is putting into practice the feminist slogan *the personal is the political*. It does not mean getting everything right, being pure or perfect, or condemning others who fail or refuse to follow you (even if some people may, for whatever personal reasons, take this approach). Again, one of the real merits of lifestyle is that it highlights both the plurality of ethical decisions we make and the practical difficulties we face if and when we try to put those ethics into practice. Interestingly, some argue that in highlighting ethical disagreements, lifestyle politics is inherently divisive and therefore wrong. What it in fact does is make divisions that already exist transparent, and whilst this poses certain challenges, we would do better to acknowledge them now than wait until after the revolution to realise that, divisive



though they are, it is not only capitalism and the state that are responsible for conflict and disagreement. If we want to not only change the world, but also to create *and maintain a better* world, then we need to be more honest about the choices we will have to make when we succeed. Resources will still be scarce, people will still hold different and conflicting values; life will never be a bland and conformist utopia, and whilst it may look very different, we will always have *politics* in some form or another. Creating a theory and practice of a politics of daily life now is precisely what is needed then to lay the ground for a post-capitalist, post-state future.

## **Conclusions**

Having acknowledged the limitations we are faced with, lifestyle suggests that we nonetheless have considerable scope to act differently, and that doing so can have a tremendous effect on the world. One person refusing to submit to the lures of capitalism, who decides instead to forge a life more suited to her values, who chooses to support other ventures that hold similar values and refrains from supporting those that don't – one such person will never change the world. But, as naïve as it may sound, it's worth just asking; what would happen if a million people did that, as best they could, every day? Or ten million people, or a billion? Of course, the most obvious response to this is that this doesn't happen; it's a nice idea, but it simply doesn't happen. But we need to ask; why not? Why don't people use the power they have? Why do we march against coal-fired power stations then use ten times the energy we need every other day of their life? Why do people protest against sweat-shops and yet regularly buy products made in them?

Again, for some, the answer is that lifestyle politics ignores the fact that people are not in a position to make such decisions – the structural dimensions of capitalism don't allow it. Most people live under constant economic and social pressures that make living such a life all but impossible. But is this really true? Aren't there in fact an infinite number of things that millions of people could do in their daily lives to slowly move away from capitalist ways of thinking and doing? It seems undeniable that there are, and there seems to be no real argument to suggest it is not at least worth trying to do those things, to see how far we can push capitalism out of our lives. When we hit upon a wall, we will need to wait until there are enough of us to topple it, but the sooner we start, and the more we encourage others to do so, the quicker we can smash the entire fabric of our current world, and forge out a new one...a world that we want to see.