

# ‘Something for All, So That None May Escape’<sup>1</sup>: Reworking the Critique of Consumption

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Any attempt to renew a serious critique of ‘consumerism’, or ‘consumer society’ is faced with a number of major difficulties; foremost of course among these, are the endlessly self-referential tautologies of accepted wisdom on the subject, which have acquired a seeming near-monopoly over existing theoretical explanations and definitions. The purpose of this essay will be to try and offer a few specifically critical perspectives on consumerism and the role this plays in helping reproduce the otherwise fragmented social relations of late capitalist society, with the hope of contributing to reworking and renewing the critique of consumption. Among those issues raised in the course of the essay, it will also be argued that in addition to the alienated practises of consumption for its own sake, a critical comprehension of this same compulsive activity is inseparable from an understanding of how this is essential to the reproduction of the capitalist law of value and the ever-difficult balancing act of maintaining the rate of profit. The antagonistic nature of this analysis should be self-evident, but it can be restated that the aim is to challenge and undermine existing assumptions on the subject. The essay is aware of its limitations on drawing outright conclusions and does not pretend to offer comprehensive treatment of what is a vast subject; instead it aims to raise a number of key critical questions the author hopes in due course will be developed in greater detail.

Societies in which the consumption of material goods came to assume a dominance and visibility previously unimaginable could be said to have only properly appeared in the decades since the end of 1950’s post-war austerity, although their origins can obviously be traced back much further. The existing form of society is often described as being consumption-driven, or consumption-led, at least in the hyper-developed regions of the world. This implies a shift or focus away from the previous imperatives of ‘production’ and ‘material’ necessity, with their class contradictions and antagonisms manifested on the streets as much as in the factory. The ‘affluent society’, as some were wont to call it initially is one in which the struggle for material existence has apparently been overcome[2], and in which everybody is able to freely participate. This vision of a ‘post’- class society has apparently dissolved the former antagonistic social relations (if indeed they ever existed) based on the struggle between opposing interests, by the simple availability of consumer choices on offer. By antagonistic social relations, we are talking about the struggle between classes: between those who control the means of production and command the labour of others and those who must sell their labour in order to survive.[3]

This particular ideological confection is rarely, if ever explicitly articulated, but it is an underlying assumption in most accepted accounts of the type of society we are talking about and that is exemplified by those of the US, or Western Europe. Such societies have frequently been described as exhibiting the features of ‘postmodernity’, and it is of particular significance that consumption practices, and their emphasis on the fluidity and transience of ‘identity’, should form such a key part of this description. Existing theories of consumerism sit very comfortably with the postmodern idea of an endless interplay of equivalents, in which everything is relative and becomes more or less equal to everything else, whether referring to a brand of soft drink or a political party: such relativism can be seen as indicative of this postmodern retreat ‘inwards’, where meaning rather like affect becomes purely a matter of ‘individual choice’ unconnected to anything more socially decisive. Such a form of society in which ‘leisure’

- the dead time of the commodity-form, becomes the defining purpose of economic activity, is what has been called consumerism, or as Fredric Jameson would have it, “the object world of late capitalism”[4]. Late capitalism is perhaps a more useful term than ‘consumer society’, because it defines its subject in explicitly critical-historical terms, indicting the present era of (over) consumption which tends toward justification by (over) production, in pleasingly unequivocal Marxian language.

On this score, it is worth noting that the socio-economic changes wrought by postmodern consumer capitalism, specifically the tendency toward a ‘service-based’ or ‘information’ economy, in no way implies the end of production relations regardless of whether the ‘service’ being produced is making coffee, or processing information of one kind or another, the better to give competitive advantage to a financial services firm. Such ‘post-industrial’ or labour is still productive of value, and determined by the same mode of production: that is, capital’s need to accumulate and reproduce itself at any cost.

It could certainly be envisioned that human agency, both collective and individual, is capable of more than just shopping - on credit -, after all human beings can remake themselves ‘in the world’, such ‘species-being’ in Marx’s somewhat unwieldy phrase is the ability to freely recreate our conditions of life, so the claim that such freedom can be observed in the act of consuming, cannot be debunked enough.

Current accepted wisdom views consumer society or ‘consumer culture’ as it frequently prefers, in extravagantly celebratory terms: virtually every act of consumption by the ‘active’ consumer is loaded with meaning and significance, which is without exception the expression and exercise of freedom, though this is nearly always in the realm of ‘the symbolic’; to take issue with this account is to be either a snotty elitist or simply behind the times. Much of the available literature on consumerism seems to assume post and neo structuralist referents as given, along with the belief that the social world can best be interpreted using a semiotic analysis, however the post-structuralist assumptions of many in the fields of cultural studies, and the sociology of consumption, are unsurprising when considered against the apparent importance of ‘identity’ as this relates to consumer society. Alternatively, it might be argued that consumer society is “the world of the commodity dominating all that is lived,”[5] where the supposedly ‘free choice’ of the consumer is in fact another alienated and reified activity without real meaning or purpose. This contention is a virtual anathema to the specialists of consumer culture, but is inescapable for any critical theory of the subject, and deserves serious attention.

## Objectifying the Subject: In the Shadow of the Commodity Form

“A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.”[6] So begins the fourth section of *Capital*, and Marx’s discussion of commodity fetishism. The products of consumer society do indeed abound in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties, being as they are the individual tokens of a society shaped by the law of value and the commodity form. The mundane nature of material objects as straightforward items of necessity that may serve some real need, or as the superfluous and unnecessary junk manufactured and sold merely in order to generate profit is revealed when they are stripped of the mystical aura of supposed uniqueness on which the consumer economy depends.

It seems useful here to explain the term ‘consumer economy’, seemingly much overlooked by mainstream theorists, and more radical critics alike. In defining ‘consumer-driven societies’ as those of late capitalism, we are forced to further explain what is meant by this description. We might define ‘late capitalism’ as the epoch covering the last five decades, in which all social life is now colonised and commodified by the market, which brings into being a world of ‘leisure’ where the absence of freedom and autonomy over the conditions of life experienced through the wage relation are reproduced in the prescribed range of ‘choices’ on offer to the consumer: you are free to choose, but only from the set of choices already on offer, the outcomes of which have essentially already been made. The simulacra of ‘choice’, then ultimately comes down to the freedom to work, to engage in wage labour, and the freedom to buy the products of wage labour. In the words of Tyler Durden the protagonist in *Fight Club* “We work jobs we hate to buy shit we don’t need.” The society of consumption is one which demands we work in order to consume and consume if all - or at least most of us - are to work, and it is in this sense that we can speak of a ‘consumer economy’, though this in no way implies the abandonment of relations of production or their critique. The moment at which the futility of the spheres of work and consumption conjoin, is well illustrated by citing a

reference used by Jean Baudrillard - not normally the best example for a critique of consumption - to Beau Brummell who it was said, when gazing at the beauty of the rural landscape would ask his servant: "Which lake do I prefer?" Such a scene is of course no longer the exclusive preserve of the Regency Dandy and poseur: millions are employed in the process by which the role of Brummell's valet is created, and are then invited to assume the role of Brummell himself, when choosing which brand of shower gel they prefer.

Affluent hyper-developed consumer societies are still capitalist societies after all, and they are still structured by alienated and exploitative social relations, both at the point of production and at the point of consumption. The steady proliferation of popular critiques of consumerism, over the last ten or fifteen years offers ample proof, if proof were needed that all is far from well in the supposed conflict-free world of consumer society. Indeed the number of articles in mainstream psychology journals[7] analysing the associated psychological and emotional problems of members of hyper-developed consumer societies are a further indication of the bleak prospects for those believing that their sense of alienation and meaninglessness, or 'objectless craving' in David Riesman's phrase, is best treated with repeated sessions of 'retail therapy', confusing symptoms with cause.

## **Happiness is Just Around the Corner: The Ideology of Consumerism**

As Conrad Lodziak has argued, it is possible to speak of an 'ideology of consumerism' which is itself at least partially reflective of standard academic wisdom on the subject, but in keeping with much of the ideological currents of postmodern capitalism, is fluid and in a virtual constant state of flux. There are, however certain basic precepts that are discernable in all variants of this affirmative celebration of consumption. The 'freedom' inherent in being able to choose between six different brands of toothpaste is held up as being freedom in its fullest sense[8], but this is basically a quantified and quantifiable definition of 'freedom' as being limitless 'choice', between what is already on offer: the freedom to reject such false choices by taking what one pleases in order to satisfy a real material need is called theft, and will be met by the full force of the security and police arms of private capital and the state: an alternative would be free, open access allowing all to be able to meet needs no longer enclosed by market relations of private property or manipulated for reproduction of the laws of value and profit.

A second feature commonly shared by most ideological variants of consumerism is the tiresome obsession with 'identity', in which consumers are said to be 'constructing meaning' in a rich "diversity of experience"[9] (sic). Consumerism as a privatistic cell, - that is the purchasing and consumption of material goods as an end in itself - can be seen as a basically socially harmless activity, and hence it is no small coincidence that it is so easily tolerated and accommodated by societies and regimes otherwise hostile to manifestations of what they perceive to be Western modernity, with all that implies for traditional values and sources of authority.

We have so far tried to argue that consumerism is as much about the reproduction of advanced capitalist economies as it is a haphazard reproduction of the otherwise haphazard and extremely fragmented social relations of societies based in large part on consumption, that is, advanced or late capitalism Marxist critiques of consumerism have tended to overlook the economic role played by mass consumption, in favour of the ideological or cultural aspects - partly it would seem, to avoid the accusation of economic determinism. But whilst a crudely economic, objectivist Marxism is to be rejected, at least by those seeking to develop the critique of consumption from an anti-capitalist perspective, so should the 'culturalist' explanations of consumer societies that have frequently dispensed altogether with any trace of 'materialism', and in the case of many of those associated with the founding of the discipline, to a rejection of Marxism altogether.[10] The need for advanced, hyper-developed capitalist economies to encourage the compulsion to buy for the sake of buying, - replete with references to 'consumer confidence' as reflected in company sales figures, can be seen as an economic imperative, since the 'actually existing' potential for the overcoming of material scarcity, must be arrested and contained, if the capitalist economy is to continue. To be sure, the

Another point worth noting is that although relative affluence may have increased exponentially in the last four decades, this has been accompanied by the outgrowth of credit industries to facilitate increased spending, that would otherwise be unavailable to the majority, were they to rely on real wages.[11] Similarly, technological production's ability to mass produce items for purchase outstrips actual demand for them or rather it would do were it not for the continual supersession of built-in obsolescence, and planned wastage. We should not forget here the economic influence of the planning industries devoted to recording and measuring the metrics of consumption, and the

advertising, marketing and 'branding' sectors equally devoted to ensuring consumers do what is required of them by making a purchase, any purchase, but preferably the more the better.

Parallel to these economic measures, there has been the conspicuous ideological reorienting of popular attitudes to debt, and the promotion of the idea that this is not really such a bad thing after all debt facilitates consumption, and enforces dependency on wage labour. The Anglo-American insistence that being a mortgage slave equals 'owning your own home', and the all but mandatory requirement to take on such a burden, and the acceptance of its noxious proprietary ideology, can also be seen as further evidence of the link between consumption and credit (debt) as a means of social discipline.

It is also interesting to note here the pious, moralistic disapproval that is always heaped on those who find themselves in serious difficulty, and which is never far away, even as the calls to further increase spending are intensified. In effect this is the market-driven each-against-all demand that seeks to place all responsibility for so called 'failure' on the individual, regardless of whether they are actually responsible, or even able to influence factors mostly beyond their control. Such sanctimonious shopkeeper moralism could be glimpsed in the chiding tones of opinion columns in the business and mainstream press alike, following the initial 'sub-prime' mortgage debacle, that helped precipitate the global 'credit crunch': very different styles written for very different audiences, but the message the same: you only have yourselves to blame. This moralism is also apparent in explanations of how the apparently unfathomable dynamics of global capitalism are supposed to work, and how they begin to breakdown - revealing the 'pure science' of economics to be less 'scientific' than first thought. It is useful to mention this moralism since it is an accusation frequently levelled at critics of consumerism by those whose writings have come to constitute accepted academic wisdom on the subject who are usually accused - in addition to being 'elitist' because of their disdain for consumer capitalism - of wishing to impose an ascetic morality on the rest of society.

Although this essay is a long way from offering final 'conclusions' to the central questions it seeks to raise, we have tried to offer a few tentative insights for further critical analyses, which have now been all but completely consigned to the past as museum pieces of only limited historical interest by the guardians of the sub-discipline, in the hope of contributing their further development. The critique of consumption is not based on a desire for asceticism, any more than a critique of populism comes from a standpoint of elitism, what is at stake is the 'vampire-like' power of capital in Marx's phrase, feeding off an increasingly drained and anaemic humanity and an increasingly ravaged planet. The critique of consumerism remains an alarmingly pressing concern for all, and time is not on our side.

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## Endnotes

1. The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception Adorno, T. and Horkheimer, M. in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944, 1972) (New York: Herder and Herder) <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/adorno/1944/culture-industry.htm>

2. This remains highly debatable however, depending on the definition of 'overcoming scarcity' that is being used. Hyper-developed capitalism, remains capitalism, in which the majority of people are, in Marx's phrase "the plaything of alien forces", and who are compelled either by market relations or The State to work for a fraction of the value they produce, which is in any case expended in paying for their material survival - always precarious, and even more so in the present neoliberal era.

3. It should be clarified here, that although 'other' oppressions are important too and do indeed count for as much as class, class remains the universal and inescapable commonality of experience that unifies or at

least has the potential to unify these differing struggles. To remain within the parameters of what becomes an exclusive identity politics at the expense of class and class struggle is to already betray a comfortable liberal accommodation and assimilation to the existing status quo and to defend it against more far-going critiques.

4. Jameson, F. (1988) *Postmodernism and Consumer Society* p.9 in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (London: Verso)

5. Debord, G. (1967) *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red,) Thesis 37 <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm>

6. Marx, K. (1867, 1995, 1999) *The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof, Capital Vol.1* Section 4 <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm#S4>

7. Consumerism and its Discontents De Angelis., T. (2004) in *Monitor on Psychology* Volume 35, No. 6 American Psychological Association <http://www.apa.org/monitor/jun04/discontents.html>
8. I buy, therefore I am, Jonathan Birchall, *Financial Times* September 6/7 2008
9. Consumption and its consequences Miller, D. (1997) in *Consumption and Everyday Life* ed. MacKay, H. (Milton Keynes: Open University Press)
10. However, considering that the 'Marxism' of those around Stuart Hall, 'New Times' and the late Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham was basically of a fairly standard orthodoxy and linked to a faction of the Communist Party of Great Britain, and its 'Marxism Today' party organ, this is hardly something to be mourned.
11. Consumer debt outstrips GDP Victoria Hartley, *The Guardian* August 22 2008 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/money/2008/aug/22/debt.consumeraffairs> and also Consumers resist pressure on credit Daphne Strauss, *Financial Times* February 22, 2008, but also interesting is Problem debt hits £25bn *Financial Times* 16.04.2008

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