



ephemera:
theory & politics in organization

THE POLITICS
OF CONSUMPTION

What is *ephemera*: theory & politics in organization?

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theory

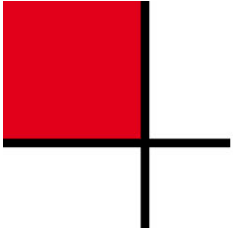
ephemera encourages contributions that explicitly engage with theoretical and conceptual understandings of organizational issues, organizational processes and organizational life. This does not preclude empirical studies or commentaries on contemporary issues, but such contributions consider how theory and practice intersect in these cases. We especially publish articles that apply or develop theoretical insights that are not part of the established canon of organization studies. *ephemera* counters the current hegemonization of social theory and operates at the borders of organization studies in that it continuously seeks to question what organization studies is and what it can become.

politics

ephemera encourages the amplification of the political problematics of organization within academic debate, which today is being actively de-politized by the current organization of thought within and without universities and business schools. We welcome papers that engage the political in a variety of ways as required by the organizational forms being interrogated in a given instance.

organization

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ephemera

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The politics of consumption

Alan Bradshaw, Norah Campbell and
Stephen Dunne

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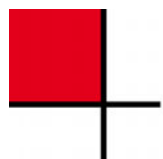


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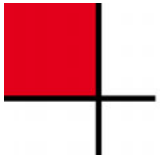
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The politics of consumption*

Alan Bradshaw, Norah Campbell and Stephen Dunne

If Politics, following Aristotle (1984), is a matter of analysing, comparing and ultimately creating practices of human association, we will do well to regard consumption practices as inherently political. Such a regard requires us to take a comparative-prospective disposition towards the roles and practices that underpin the production and distribution of subsistence and luxury. It also requires us to treat the functional mechanics of what political economists used to call ‘the mode of production’, that is, the set of practices through which human societies produce their means of survival and distinction, thereby reproducing themselves, as characteristically political. This special issue brings such a series of politically-oriented accounts of contemporary consumption practices together. Its contributors attempt to see practices of consumption for what they actually are, beyond the motifs of concealment and construction which we briefly discuss by way of introduction below, for the sake of debating what these practices might eventually become. Consumption, we argue, is political: to seek to analyse as if it were otherwise is to dogmatically seek refuge in a world of fantasy.

* We are grateful to the Arts and Humanities Benefactions Scheme, Trinity College Dublin, which helped to fund the conference, the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, for providing its setting, Ekaterina Chertkovskaya, for filming the proceedings, and the conference participants and audience, for their collegiate devotion and enthusiasm throughout. We would also like to thank Armin Beverungen, Nick Butler, Cormac Deane, Rashné Limki, Bernadette Loacker, Anna-Maria Murtola, Lena Olaison, Birke Otto and Stephen Shukaitis for their help with the many and varied tasks associated within bringing this issue together. The *ephemera* collective would like to mark its particular indebtedness to Norah Campbell for her high on heroic efforts in coordinating a uniquely memorable and thoroughly enjoyable event. She was, in the spirit of the theme itself, the productive condition of possibility for everything that has been and will be consumed.

This is not to say that we should disregard fantasy in attempting to account for the politics of consumption, however. The most enduring account of the natural state of consumption, as it were, comes to us in the form of a work of fiction – Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1994). Through Robinson’s memoirs, countless readers have vicariously gained experience of the Hobbesian predicament of absolute liberty, of the responsibility for social production in the absence of a social contract – where almost nothing is yet in place and where almost everything remains up for grabs. Defoe’s novel invites its readers into the engineering room of the social machine, an imagined but imaginative site wherein social conventions momentarily give way to the creation of the social and where current political practices temporarily make way for the production of new political principles. Little wonder then, as Karl Marx put it, that ‘political economists are fond of Robinson Crusoe stories’ (1976: 169). Defoe provides the abstract lie which allows political economists to bring the concrete truth of consumption into ever sharper relief.

Marx is by no means an exception to his own rule. He too discusses Robinson’s predicament, most memorably in the context of revealing what he famously called the secret of the commodity fetish (1976: 163-177). By analysing the capitalist mode of production through the example of ‘its elementary form’ (1976: 125), the commodity which bears the stamps of usability and exchangeability, and by comparing the capitalist mode of production to a series of alternative modes of production (ancient, feudal, cooperative and, in Robinson Crusoe’s case, fictional), Marx sought to reveal the politics of consumption which routinely lie concealed behind the analytical categories deployed by his political economic contemporaries. ‘Bourgeois economics’, as Marx’s critique of political economy would have it, was historically and prospectively myopic (but otherwise correct) in that it produced:

forms of thought which are socially valid, and therefore objective, for the relations of production belonging to this historically-determined mode of social production, i.e. commodity production. The whole mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour on the basis of commodity production, vanishes therefore as soon as we come to other forms of production. (ibid.: 169)

Bourgeois economics, for Marx, certainly did a fine job of describing historically-produced reality on the terms produced by the extant mode of production – capitalism. The critique of political economy which he produced, however, sought both to contrast capitalism to historically and hypothetically extant modes of production, and also to posit an alternative mode of production which might eventually come into being. Of the latter Marx writes:

Let us finally imagine, for a change, an association of free men, working with the means of production held in common, and expending their many different forms of labour-power in full self-awareness as one single social labour force. All the characteristics of Robinson's labour are repeated here, but with the difference that they are social instead of individual... The total product of our imagined association is a social product. One part of this product serves as fresh means of production and remains social. But another part is consumed by the members of the association as means of subsistence. This part must therefore be divided among them. The way this division is made will vary with the particular kind of social organization of production and the corresponding level of social development attained by the producers. (ibid.: 171-172)

The Marxist critical project, then, affirms that it isn't enough to understand the politics of consumption by analysing and contrasting modes of production – a critique of political economy, as he sees it, must also produce an imaginative space within which political economic alternatives can be proposed, considered and ultimately produced. Marxism, then, seeks to think behind whatever it is that bourgeois political economic categories have *concealed* in order to make it possible to *construct* an alternative political economy. This possible act of construction, however, leaves the important political questions concerning the consumption and distribution of the 'total product of our imagined association' (ibid.) demonstrably open, ultimately answerable not by a political economic vanguard, Marxist or otherwise, but rather by 'the particular kind of social organization of production and the corresponding level of social development attained by the producers' (ibid.). This non-committal formulation of such crucial questions must be seen as an instance of political *and* philosophical prudence. An ancient political-philosophical predecessor for it exists in Book II of Plato's *Republic* (1997: 1011-1012) where we find Socrates cautiously saying to Glaucon:

It isn't merely the origin of a city that we're considering, it seems, but the origin of a *luxurious* city. And that may not be a bad idea, for by examining it, we might very well see how justice and injustice grow up in cities...The things I mentioned earlier and the way of life I described won't satisfy some people, it seems, but couches, tables, and other furniture will have to be added, and, of course, all sorts of delicacies, perfumed oils, incense, prostitutes, and pastries. We mustn't provide them only with the necessities we mentioned at first, such as houses, clothes, and shoes, but painting and embroidery must be begun, and gold, ivory, and the like acquired. Isn't that so?

Yes.

Then we must enlarge our city, for the healthy one is no longer adequate. We must increase it in size and fill it with a multitude of things that go beyond what is necessary for a city – hunters, for example, and artists or imitators, many of whom work with shapes and colours, many with music...

The *Republic's* enigmatic account of consumption, just like Marx's, throws seemingly trivial everyday human foibles and follies into a broader political light. Painting-likers, pastry-eaters and shoe-wearers alike, thus illuminated, must come to see themselves as interconnected actors consciously negotiating the political nature of productive social bonds throughout everything that they do: gawking, gobbling and grinding not least of all. Just as Marx unveils the mode of production lurking behind each and every instance of consumption, so too, citizens electing to lead a *luxurious* life within the ideal republic, Socrates demonstrates, must be co-related with the existence of otherwise needless toil and conquest. Having pointed this out, however, Socrates prudently refuses to announce whether the costs of a life of luxurious consumption are fairly paid for, nor does he cast political-philosophical judgment over whether a life of luxurious consumption is justifiable in principle (Berry, 1994; Springborg, 1981). The philosopher instead brings us towards the logical realisation that the cost of luxury is toil and tussle, as well as towards the empirical realisation that these costs have traditionally been borne by the non-beneficiary. After that, it is left to Socrates' protagonists, as well as to Plato's subsequent readers, to decide whether the life of indulgent consumption is one worth having, which is also to say, one worth working for. Political and philosophical prudence yet again – the devil is in the sociological detail.

Socrates' mercilessly brief account of consumption, like Marx's account of commodity consumption, certainly does not oblige dandies and decadents to abandon the dearly-prized world of indulgent consumption as such. They rather both insist upon taking that world's privileges with something other than a pinch of salt. Both the *Republic* onto Capital underline how the relationship between consumption and production is inherently political – even a pinch of salt has to be pinched from somewhere and by somebody. We will do well to bear the political nature of consumption practices in mind.

Concealing the politics of consumption

The free Athenian did not need Socrates to reveal the hidden mode of production to him; he already knew perfectly well that the foundation of his own freedom was nothing other than the ritualised and naturalised domination of others. Slavery was not a poorly kept secret malevolently lurking behind an allegedly hypocritical ancient Athenian free citizenry. It was rather the citizenry's understanding of freedom's openly acknowledged condition. We should not then say that the ancient Greeks ignored or disingenuously failed to recognise how the satisfaction of the tastes of some necessitated the heightening of the tribulations of others. We should rather say that the ancient Greeks directly confronted this

matter as a political problem, the natural solution for which seemed to them to be slavery.

This ancient Greek understanding of partial freedom (freedom for the few at the expense of the many) did not lend itself towards intensely reflective or self-reprimanding political-philosophical scrutiny, at least not until much later (Hegel, 1991). Aristotle's avoidance of the potential paradox that a citizen's freedom is dependent on the existence of a necessarily subordinate class, as Marx pointed out, therefore says a lot less about the limits of Aristotle's intellect and a lot more about how Aristotle's intellect, as with anybody else's, is conditioned by the extant mode of production¹. Just as the ancient Greek idea of a freedom that is dependent on slavery obviously seems an absurd proposition to the liberal sensibilities of the contemporary reader, so too, the very idea of a 'free-labourer'² would have appeared to the ancient Greeks as little other than a regrettable contradiction in terms.

The inherently political nature of consumption, then, was previously bathed in the ancient Greek light of proximity. Within the ancient Greek *agora*, free citizens came face to face for the purpose of political deliberation: the marketplace was the mutually acknowledged site of politics. The politics of contemporary consumption, by way of contrast, comes very much shrouded in the darkness of distance. The contemporary marketplace visitor is rarely, if ever, engaged in such a self-consciously political act. What was an inherently public role – going to market to debate – has now become a distinctively private matter – going to market to consume. The place in which the practicalities of the good life used to be debated has become the site in which images of the good life get bought and sold. The contemporary *agora* exists not for the sake of the *polis* but for the sake of the *oikos*³.

1 'Aristotle himself was unable to extract this fact, that, in the form of commodity-values, all labour is expressed as equal human labour and therefore as labour of equal quality, by inspection from the form of value, because Greek society was founded on the labour of slaves, hence had as its natural basis the inequality of men and of their labour-powers.' (Marx, 1976: 151-152)

2 'This worker must be free in the double sense that as a free individual he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that, on the other hand, he has no other commodity for sale, i.e. he is rid of them, he is free of all the objects needed for the realization [*Verwirklichung*] of his labour-power'. (Marx, 1976: 272-273)

3 Contemporary analysts of the politics of consumption, as will be argued throughout this special issue, have put concepts such as *buy-cotting* and *prosumption* to work in order to suggest that contemporary consumption is undertaken with an unprecedented level of sensitivity towards ethical and political issues. The veracity of such a claim is both affirmed and denied throughout: most obviously within the Arvidsson vs. Zwick feature.

Contemporary market participation, then, is largely a matter of internalisation – into (increasingly virtual) shopping baskets, into houses, into bellies, into fantasy spaces of the mind. This is all to say that what was once a political site has now become a site which serves to conceal the political. Regarding the complex social-psychological dynamics through which politics of consumption gets concealed today, Bruce Robbins (2002: 86) reminds us of the opening of David Lodge's *Nice Work* (1988). There, a Marxist-feminist academic gazes out of an airplane window and begins to imagine the huge and hidden world which the contemporary consumer simultaneously acknowledges and ignores:

The housewife, switching on her electric kettle to make another cup of tea, gave no thought to the immense complex of operations that made that simple action possible: the building and maintenance of the power station that produced the electricity, the mining of coal or pumping of oil to fuel the generators, the laying of miles of cable to carry the current to her house, the digging and smelting and milling of ore or bauxite into sheets of steel or aluminium, the cutting and pressing and welding of the metal into the kettle's shell, spout and handle, the assembling of these parts with scores of other components—coils, screws, nuts, bolts, washers, rivets, wires, springs, rubber insulation, plastic trimmings; then the packaging of the kettle, the advertising of the kettle, the marketing of the kettle, to wholesale and retail outlets, the transportation of the kettle to warehouses and shops, the calculation of its price, and the distribution of its added value between all the myriad people and agencies concerned in its production and circulation. The housewife gave no thought to all this as she switched on her kettle.

Robbins presents this uncanny moment as one which we have all experienced – it is that precise moment in which we peep over the precipice of commodity consumption and catch a glimpse of the vast and sublime backdrop of production. We all know this relatively distant world of production exists as the very condition of possibility for the relatively close world of consumption *and yet* we are very rarely disposed to think much more about it, let alone actually do anything disruptive in it. This peculiar moment of partial recognition, Robbins suggests, is as trivial as it is troubling: trivial because it is so patently obvious that the things that we consume appear to us from somewhere, troubling because 'this moment of consciousness will not be converted into action' (ibid.). We order another cup of coffee. We turn back to the book we had been reading. We get on with our lives in the world of consumption, a world behind the back of which the world of production is regularly, necessarily, partially concealed. These complex dynamics of concealment warrant the sort of sustained attention which our contributors grant them.

It isn't only from contemporary consumers that the world of production is structurally or even wilfully concealed, however. Bourgeois economics remains alive and well within contemporary analyses of capitalist social relations.

Consumer Culture Theory's (CCT) chief proponents, for example, boast of how the 'stale polemic' that 'portrays consumer culture as a domain of ideological indoctrination and consumers as passive dupes of the capitalist culture industry' has been jettisoned in favour of a more dialogue-infused model (Arnould and Thompson, 2007: 9). Elsewhere, Critical Marketing's spokespeople describe their contribution as an 'eclectic framework of critique which leaves space for many voices other than those of card-carrying critical theorists' (Brownlie et al., 1999: 9). Cova, Kozinets and Shankar for their part somewhat more diplomatically but nevertheless ultimately-Marx-grave-dancingly suggest that

Marxian concepts such as commodity fetishism, reification and commodification still provide perceptive insights for our understanding of a market society. But this passive absorption model of consumers is not what we see. (2007: 4)

Such a politics concealing account of consumption is not unique to business and management studies. In the world of anthropology, Daniel Miller (2010: 80) for example, complains that research 'dressed in the guise of critical or radical political endeavour' is little other than a 'claimed concern with the actually oppressed conditions of our humanity' while Binkley and Littler (2008: 520) bemoan the 'chest-thumping denunciations of the 'culture industry'... one of the left's favourite intellectual parlour games'. To suggest that there is a politics of consumption based on concealment, then, seems to run the risk of disingenuously speaking "from a middle-class subject position" and to be "steeped in a longstanding critique of materialism... often directed at the supposed consumer excesses of the working class" (Arnould, 2007: 146). Contributors to this special issue may face similar reactionary accusations. We believe, however, that this risk is very much worth taking.

Constructing the politics of consumption

The politics of consumption is not always a matter of concealment in need of critical revelation, however. Sometimes the politics inherent to consumption are only too apparent. The 'kitchen debate' between Nikita Khrushchev and Richard Nixon in Moscow at the American National Exhibition in 1959 offers a compelling case in point. Rather than seeking to demonstrate US superiority to the USSR through the evidence of military might, a modern kitchen instead served to symbolise the comforts and luxuries available in a consumer society yet denied under communism (Image 1).

Consumerism was here very explicitly constructed as a tool of political propaganda - this remains the case. The rise of mass consumer culture marked by the prominence of suburban living, attendant mass-produced automobiles and the provision of money necessary to finance it all, here and elsewhere became ideologically entangled with

politicised ideas of empowerment, modernity, democracy and freedom. As Schwarzkopf's (2011) and Tadajewski's (2006) histories of marketing practice have pointed out, the ideal of an equivalency between democracy and the freedom to choose (e.g. Friedman, 2002) was largely the outcome of the American ideological front during the McCarthy era and later on during the Cold War. The construction of consumer culture hence was and remains an ideological battlefield, the continuation of war by other means⁴.



Figure 1: 1959 – Nixon tempts Khrushchev with a variety of US consumer goods in Moscow.⁵

Today, consumption is part and parcel of the contemporary political toolkit of financialization (Martin, 2002, see also Fine, this issue: NB fn. 24): the most democratic form of 'economic shock therapy' (Klein, 2007). In Ireland, for example, the consumerist 'excess' of the Celtic Tiger era is often recalled to morally justify the imposition of an imbalanced austerity. But the Celtic Tiger

4 The complex relationship between consumption in the East and the West is memorably dramatized in *Good Bye Lenin* (2003) where the collapse of the Berlin Wall beckons in an invasion, not of NATO military forces, but of Western brands. In one indicative scene, we see a statue of Lenin being taken away by helicopter whilst simultaneously, on the streets below, articulated lorries carry the objects of Western consumerism into the previously Eastern city. Consider also: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bundesarchiv_Bild_183-1987-0704-077,_Berlin,_750-Jahr-Feier,_Festumzug,_Computer.jpg.

5 Source: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2008/sep/18/design.jackmasey>.

was emphatically not a rising tide that lifted all boats, but rather one which widened the already large gap of economic inequality (Allen, 2000)⁶. So, when Christian Pauls, German Ambassador to Ireland announces ‘Basically, *you* got carried away on this new found prosperity,’ and is paraphrased as declaring that Ireland had a ‘party’ and now has to ‘pay for it’ (Delaney, 2012), consumption is measured as a gross average in a manner which is systematically blind to distributive disparities. Hence in Ireland the consumer is constructed as deserving of the buckle-tightening political pain currently administered:

So you didn't go ‘crazy’ and buy a house or a car? Well, perhaps you took a personal loan or used a credit card to buy something that you just couldn't wait to save for... Still annoyed at being lumped with the blame for the mess that you had no hand, act or part in creating? Then take a moment to check your pay slip; you know the piece of paper where the numbers kept increasing to keep pace with the madness going on all around you?...Did anyone ever complain that they were being paid too much for doing too little and offer to work for less? (Quinlan, 2012)

Contemporary consumption, then, has become constructed as a political sin which needs to be paid for. Inasmuch as a booming economy came with a promise of a rising tide that would lift all, those previously located at the margins of consumer society who suddenly experienced boosted spending power are now judged to have made their purchases in a state of reckless excess. By an ideological sleight of hand, indulging in the pleasures of consumerism means to have become culpable: *you* are now asked to take responsibility for *your* ‘carbon footprint’ which is attributable and reducible to *your* actions and can be calculated and applied in the form of a judgment of guilt (Cremin, 2012; Jones, 2010). Every time *you* travel to work, every time *you* take a flight, *you* produce an act of pollution (Bohm and Dhabi, 2008). Likewise, in food consumption, the consumer is cast a rational, independent person that freely ingests what he or she wants; if they choose to overeat or not exercise, that’s their fault (Albritton, 2009). If they cannot withstand food advertising they are stupid and ill-equipped. In both cases, responsibility is externalised from the state and capital alike and the consumer becomes cast as the entire frame of reference, thereby blindsiding the larger and often invisible actions that lead to planes in the sky and food on the table.

The Road to Serfdom was believed to have been littered with the detritus of paternalistic over-reliance (Hayek, 2001). The road to liberty, by way of an elevating contrast, was one to be walked by heroically self-determining agents (Rand, 2007; Rand 2008). The way of consumptive self-determination, however,

6 Ireland is one of the ‘Big Seven’ countries in the world with the highest ratio of financial assets in tax havens to GDP, while the top 5% of the population hold 40% of the country’s private assets (Hebous, 2011; Merrill Lynch, 2010)

is today one and the same with the road to serfdom – the supposedly free consumer is now forced to ‘take upon oneself the costs and risks of the economic and financial disaster’ (Lazzarato, 2012: 12). For today it is ‘the population’, as Lazzarato explains, which ‘must take charge of everything business and the Welfare State externalise onto society’ (*ibid.*: 9; see also Foucault, 2009; Foucault 2010). The contemporary consumer, in this sense, is guilty of the mortal sin of having consumed. This irreparably fallen nature must be paid for indefinitely and, paradoxically, through yet more consumption. Contemporary consumption, then, is routinely constructed as inherently political to the extent that it is both responsible for causing the global recession, through its excesses, and also responsible for overcoming the consequences of these excesses through yet more consumption!

Contributing to the politics of consumption

In May 2012, we extended an open invitation to Dublin’s Royal Society of the Antiquaries of Ireland, in order to debate the politics of consumption⁷. This special issue is largely the result of discussions which took place during that event, though it also includes contributions from colleagues who were not able to join us in Dublin. The issue includes a mixture of conceptual and empirical investigations into the politics of consumption, a head-to-head debate on the idea of consumer citizenship, a series of notes on the relationship between art, politics, and consumption, and reviews of two recent books which tackle germane questions.

As was the case with the conference proceedings, Ben Fine’s ‘Consumption matters’ also lifts the curtain on this special issue. Fine’s piece offers a detailed retrospective account of the nature and importance of the Marxist inspired System of Provision (SOP) approach to the politics of consumption with which his name has been synonymous. The generously detailed piece initiates the reader into the methodological predecessors, as well as the conceptual and empirical resources, which characterise the SOP approach to the politics of consumption. It also accounts for some of the many debates within which it has been and remains mired. Beyond the 2 Cs of the politics of consumption which has helped us frame this brief editorial, Ben adds 10 more whilst suggesting further possibilities still. Beyond these 10 Cs, the core contribution of ‘Consumption matters’, in addition to offering an account of contemporary

7 The conference programme can be downloaded here: <http://www.ephemerajournal.org/events/politics-consumption> and a brief write-up of the event is available here: <http://cppeblog.org/?p=156>.

debates on the politics of consumption, is a speculative consideration of what lies in wait for any consumer-oriented politics.

As the author of numerous books on environmental philosophy and the politics of consumption, Kate Soper was also a natural keynote speaker for the conference – we are delighted to be able to include her work here. ‘The dialectics of progress: Irish ‘belatedness’ and the politics of prosperity’ plays on James Joyce’s famous and fondly ironic comment about the Irish being the most anachronistic race in Europe. Soper uses it as a launchpad for a unique account of Irish globalization which journeys through Irish politics and literature and forces us to confront the quixotic, and poignant, nature of Irish capitalism. The contribution also gives the reader a succinct overview of Soper’s influential concept of alternative hedonism. Throughout, Soper urges us to reconsider what we mean by progress, even going so far as to point towards ways of living out such a reconsideration. Loitering, conviviality, relocalization and, above all, a non-instrumental ethics of leisure, stand at the core of what Soper contributes to the debate.

Peter Armstrong’s characteristically spiky effort to resuscitate the classical concept of alienation within consumption-orientated debates is written against the backdrop of his conspicuous disdain for the fast and loose way in which this concept has been supposedly dispensed with, on the one hand, coupled with the casting of an equally scornful eye upon self-improvement television, on the other. As readers of Armstrong’s work have come to expect, the piece is as sharp and exacting as it is subtle and erudite. Matthias Zick Varul’s socialist defence of consumer culture then presents a counter-intuitive exposition of how many Marxist ideals are actually to be found within practices of consumer culture. Contrary to the popular polemic against consumption as a site of selfish materialist alienation which should be avoided in the name of socialism, Varul presents his case.

Eleftheria Lekakis’ then contribution offers the reader a glimpse into the concerns which will be expressed within her forthcoming book on the politics of Fair Trade. Bauman’s analysis of liquid modernity offers a poetically fitting conceptual framework through which she analyses how contemporary coffee consumers negotiate the porous distinction between consumption as a means of helping the impoverished, on the one hand, and consumption as a means of helping the self towards a refreshing pick-me-up, on the other. Isleide Fontenelle’s analysis of the construction of consumer guilt then rounds off the papers section of the special issue by paying particular attention to the media representation of responsibility and guilt, demonstrating the gradual emergence of the self-reproaching consumer as a malleable political instrument

Next in the issue we have a pugilistic head-to-head between Adam Arvidsson and Detlev Zwick on the idea of consumer citizenship. The battle is not quite a matter of the blue corner versus the red corner, though the antagonists do end up dividing their analyses along overtly political lines. Drawing on the relevance of the work of Tarde, Arendt and Aristotle to an analysis of the politics of consumption, Arvidsson envisions a new mode of collaborative production in an era of media-rich, networked and digitized society. He ambitiously showcases a number of novel ideas, including a new type of value – reputational value – through which he accounts for why people consume collaboratively and productively. Zwick's response, on the other hand, attempts to pinpoint the pitfalls of Arvidsson's vision of contemporary economic rationality. While Zwick agrees with Arvidsson's account of the norms of communicative capitalism, he is emphatically opposed to it as a post-capitalist *vision*, suggesting it is more a reconfiguration of the current unequal distribution of resources than a radicalisation thereof. As the conversation continues, Arvidsson and Zwick further clarify what they each understand to be at stake in the debate concerning contemporary consumer citizenship and end up standing quite opposed.

Also in the spirit of reversing arguments, Olga Kravets' and Stevphen Shukaitis' notes avoid the dominant paradigm of a consumer culture that appropriates counter-discourses by instead returning to Constructivist concerns with thinking of objects as comrades in a revolutionary struggle, as opposed to slaves to our hands. Such was the richness of discussion generated by the discussion between Shukaitis' paper at the conference and Kravets' response to it that a series of follow up commentaries were solicited. These response pieces form the basis for a general discussion of how objects and commodities can themselves serve political ends. Other than the pieces offered by Kravets and Shukaitis, the integrated feature also includes Antigoni Mamou's exploration of the radical rejuvenation of one of the most co-opted radical images of all, Jim Fitzpatrick's portrait of Che Guevara and Andreas Chatzidakis' ethnographic overview of how commodities have laid claim to competing narratives in austerity Greece. The artist David Mabb presents and discusses some of his work on the encounters between William Morris and Popova – it is from this encounter that our special issue received its cover. The special issue then rounds off with George Patsiaouras' review of Daniel Miller's most recent book on consumption, and Angus Cameron and Gareth Browns review of NAMA Lab's political work.

Taken together, each of the contributions underlines the renewed importance of considering consumption not simply as a site of economic phenomena, but, moreover, as a site of politics that must be correlated to logics of production, capital and social responsibility. Such investigations are all the more important now at a time where the politics of consumption is simultaneously concealed and

constructed, denied and affirmed, neglected and expected. The pieces underline the need for a politically-oriented analysis of the politics of consumption, not only for the sake of informing political debates concerning the nature of consumption, but also for the sake of informing political practices and the role which consumption might play within these.

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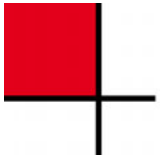
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Consumption matters

Ben Fine

Somewhat indulgently, I have met the request both to explain my approach to consumption *and* how it came about. I do so by first indicating the origins of the system of provision [SOP], approach to consumption and, then, its attachment to cultural systems. I follow this by attending to some debates around the SOP approach and close by seeking to bring out some implications for the nature of consumer politics.

To and from systems of provision...¹

My concerted interest in consumption, beyond academic disciplinary duties within economics, came about by accident. I am a mathematician by first degree and mathematical economist by training, having gained a PhD in social choice theory that seeks to derive social from individual preferences over alternatives (Fine, 1974). In the late 1980s, serving on an appointments panel at Birkbeck College, University of London, one applicant had done research on the priority order of acquisition of consumer durables. I found the standard approach to be unacceptable², and, through lateral thinking, realised that my earlier social choice

¹ The first extensive presentation of the SOP approach is to be found in Fine and Leopold (1993) with my co-author playing a critical role in developing the notion and furnishing case studies. Whilst Fine (2002) is dubbed a second edition, it is primarily a different book with little overlap with the original text. It was inspired by a reassessment of the literature on consumption for a conference panel organised by Roy Church, Fine (2000), and upon learning that the first edition had sold out and would not be reprinted. At this time, I had already embarked upon what has proven an unsuccessful attempt to ease out of consumption studies in light of the burden of other research interests.

work offered an alternative though ready application of more or less identical techniques. I applied successfully to the ESRC for funding to use this new method, with the added wrinkle of setting acquisition of consumer durables against the fashionable hypothesis of them serving as mutually reinforcing both (female) domestic labour-saving devices and female labour market participation.

I am pleased to report that my initial prejudices against the presumption of such crude comparative advantage (save domestic labour through purchase of consumer durables that cost less than wages earned, sticky or otherwise) proved well-founded. Much more important was to establish the presence of consumer *norms* around particular durables. These are to be understood as greater or lesser disposition to own consumer durables according to socio-economic characteristics such as household composition, employment status, income, etc., without otherwise necessarily casting aside narrowly conceived economic factors such as price and income. In addition, and significantly for future work, the research on consumer durables allowed for a considerable review of labour market theory, the family and female labour market participation³, see below, and, inevitably, consumer theory as a whole.

For the latter, I found myself caught between the devil of neoclassical economics and the deep blue sea of postmodernism. For the former, consumer theory since the 1870s had been based upon the idea of fixed preferences, for fixed individuals, with a fixed and sole motive – utility maximisation – over fixed goods effectively defined by physical properties ‘subjectively’ enjoyed⁴. In addition, despite its limited and questionable principles, consumer theory was in the process of being extended across all areas of economic *and* social life in light of (the first phase of) economics imperialism⁵, for which for example choosing

2 Violating the reasonable axiom of monotonicity – if a durable became ranked higher by individuals, it ought to become ranked higher in the derived priority order, see Fine and Simister (1995).

3 See Fine (1992) and arising in part from the research but completed much later, Fine (1998b). On durables themselves, see also the primarily unpublished Fine et al (1992a-e and 1993).

4 Note that the subjectivity of the neoclassical consumer is illusory since the individual is bound by given preferences mechanically applied. See Wade Hands (2010) for the problems this creates for economists in terms of the illusory market freedom of an individual who is already predetermined apart from calculation of choices themselves.

5 For first contribution on economics imperialism, see Fine (1997) ultimately leading to Fine and Milonakis (2009) with many other contributions along the way and subsequently. See <http://www.soas.ac.uk/staff/staff30940.php>.

between war and peace is seen as akin to choosing between apples and pears⁶. By contrast, postmodernism had (re)constructed the consumer as subjectively flexible, inventive and more or less unbound by the material properties of the consumer and consumed itself.

Whether by virtue of the familiarity of, and contempt for, the treatment of consumption within my own disciplinary origins or because of postmodernism's restless conceptual criticism, my sympathies lay much more with the latter than its parallel complement within neoclassical economics⁷. But, not least by literature review across the social sciences, it was apparent that consumer theory had a more or less unlimited array of theories and variables upon which to draw, especially once incorporating psychology, market and business studies, and the burgeoning field of consumer studies itself, especially prominent in the USA, and much too naïve and grounded in business, management and marketing studies to take much notice of postmodernism (or vice-versa – what did producing and selling things have to do with the deconstruction of meaning?) other than at its radical fringes (where it reaped an exotic flavour). What did emerge, however, was the extent of 'horizontal' theories, most typically bound within particular disciplines and marked by their methods and subject matter.

An obvious example is immediately given by neoclassical economics and the idea that consumption can be reduced to the conditions under which utility is maximised; from sociology, we have emulation and distinction; and, from psychology, we have any number of horizontal perspectives from expression of identity to neural responses to stimuli. Could all such horizontal theories be stacked to give some sort of comprehensive synthesis, possibly the dream of consumer and marketing studies other than its schizophrenic predilection for both standard models and intellectual fashions? I considered not, other than in accumulating a sack of determining variables, in part because the horizontal factors are mutually incompatible methodologically, conceptually and theoretically, and, in addition, or by way of corollary, there is a need not just to stack the theories but also the structures, agencies, processes, and relations to which consumption and the consumer are attached. Further, are we addressing

6 As was (in)famously and typically put by the Nobel prizewinner for economics, James Buchanan (1984: 14):

We commence with individuals as utility maximizers ... his utility function. This function defines or describes a set of possible trade-offs among alternatives for potential choice, whether the latter be those between apples and oranges at the fruit stand or between peace and war for the nation.

7 See Fine (1998a). For an account of how the consumer and consumption got to be the way it is in within economics, see Fine (2008a).

consumption in general, human presumably, or consumption historically tied to capitalism and, hence, commodity production primarily for profit?

I am already in danger of constructing an *ex post* narrative and rationale for what became the SOP approach to consumption. Certainly, these considerations and the SOP approach emerged in tandem to focus upon the vertical approach to consumption, specifying the chain of activities connecting production to consumption (and even disposal) with the commodity as meeting point along the way. The commodity form itself structures provision in this way, even if horizontal factors, whether attached to production or consumption, also prevail alongside the imperatives of profitability. However, and heavily influenced by the work on the (UK) housing system by a colleague, Michael Ball (1983 and 1988), consumption could be usefully (if not fully) addressed through identification of different and differentiated SOPs organised along specific commodity lines. Such specifics involve tracing back from consumption and consumer through the material practices by which they are reproduced and transformed as an integral whole, or system.

These insights informed the co-authored Fine and Leopold (1993) that, in addition, offered case studies (especially of clothing and food), historical controversy (over the putative consumer revolution of the eighteenth century or, indeed, of any period)⁸, and the reconstruction of the horizontal from the SOP perspective, especially for advertising, for example. Here a deliberate assault was made upon the postmodern current of celebrating and deconstructing the meaning of (usually exotic) ads such as the woman bathing in a standalone bath with Cadbury's flake for company. Did this have anything to do with Ghanaian cocoa farmers? Apparently not, but such ads are self-selecting for the fanatics of deconstruction. But, at the time, the most important source of advertising revenue in the UK came from supermarkets engaging in 'store wars' along the lines – come to us for your weekly shop, we are cheaper, not exactly rich pickings for deconstruction, Fine (1996).

This could itself be explained by the collapse in the then property boom which had rendered the major retailers on the verge of bankruptcy, so committed had they been in purchasing out-of-town sites for hype-market development. The competition for the weekly shop became correspondingly intense. Further, supermarkets needed to balance the attraction of cheaper own brands against consumer satisfaction geared towards branded goods. For these themselves to be granted a place on supermarket shelves, alongside the less glamorous own-labels, required the fantasy brand advertising so beloved of postmodernist reading of the

8 See also Fine and Leopold (1990).

signs if not those of the major retailers at that time. To get product placement within supermarkets, branded goods had to be sufficiently high in demand to command the weekly shop at the expense of, or alongside, branded goods. Equally, supermarkets needed to choose judiciously between offering branded goods to attract shoppers and its own-label products for cheapness. In this sense, and ironically, fantasy advertising offered a misleading clue to its origins in the more mundane matters of property markets and the weekly shop⁹.

In short, the SOP approach allowed, and deliberately intended, the strengthening if not the (re)introduction of the material to the (cultural) study of consumption. As chance would have it, just as the durable/labour market study came to a close, so an ESRC programme was launched to research the (UK) Nation's Diet in order to understand why consumers did not follow healthy eating guidelines (Murcott, 1998). I applied to study food norms using the same techniques as for consumer durables. Attention focused, for example on the meat, sugar and dairy systems. For the latter, the rise of supermarket retailing had ensured the availability of a wider range of healthier low fat milks, once the uniquely protected doorstep delivery was effectively abandoned. But with the agricultural system supporting production of high fat milk, the cream had to go somewhere. And so it did, into fancy cheeses and desserts, and manufactured foods, all equally readily available in the multi-product supermarkets. Indeed, those at the forefront in the purchase of healthy milk tend to be equally prominent in the consumption of high cream products as well!

A similar story can be told for sugar, with reduction in direct consumption from the sugar bowl or in home-baking being compensated for by its incorporation within manufactured foods (alongside salt and unhealthy fats), sustaining its level of consumption per capita. Thus, analysis of the dairy and sugar systems indicated that healthy eating programmes for the consumer would tend at most to redistribute consumption, and most likely towards those on low incomes, poor diets in the first place, and least able or willing to respond to health messages, Fine et al (1996 and 1998) and Fine (1998c) for these and other studies and their many implications.

This summary crudely simplifies the results of the studies but acutely indicates the limits within which consumption, and its meanings to consumers in terms of health beliefs (and action upon them), are bound by the functioning of the respective food systems. There are also implications for definition of the boundaries of the food systems themselves, with dairy taken as a whole and not

9 This is not to deny that supermarket advertising had subsequently moved on, with greater emphasis now upon quality of own-brand, a sort of Marks and Spencer effect.

just milk, but sugar narrower than the market for sweetness and not incorporating artificial sweeteners for example, see below for boundaries. Crucially, the nature of, and boundaries between, SOPs should not be defined at the level of consumption itself (a horizontal bread and butter approach, as it were) but by tracing out the backward linkages to, and determinants of, consumption¹⁰.

Pre-occupation with (improvement of) the Nation's Diet inevitably placed the culture of consumption back on the agenda but, in the first instance, on the relatively narrow terrain of what impact healthy eating campaigns could have on what were rapidly becoming or, had already become, the dietary diseases of affluence associated primarily with overeating (itself and other syndromes, admittedly, as with obesity, constituting socially constructed labels variously interpreted)¹¹ and poor diet (salt, fat and sugar, etc.) with, for example, onset of middle-age diabetes, high blood pressure, cancers, and so on, more or less unavoidably disastrous from social and individual perspectives. Most campaigns for promoting healthier consumption sought to close the gap between the ideal and actual diets through publicising the former and, possibly, the deleterious effects of the latter. And these had failed miserably in part for systemic reasons outlined previously – what gets produced must more or less get consumed, and can be more a matter of redistributing the burden. In general, the producer dominates over consumer (health) policy, one significant exception being Norway in the interwar period when it was presumed that dairy products were good for you and, of course, the farming lobby as well, providing a rare case of synergy between the two¹².

10 I am acutely aware, and this has been raised by others and discussed in passing across my own contributions, that where one SOP ends and another begins is controversial and can only be answered empirically through identification of integral structures themselves in practice. Put another way, when does interaction at any point between SOPs lead to the formation of a single combined SOP. Posing the question in this way is, to some degree, a de facto acceptance of the SOP approach (you cannot have interaction without prior separate existence). More significantly, the confinement of the SOP approach to analysis of commodities and to consumption does involve sectorally delineated structures at the point of exchange and what comes both before and after. On all of this, see Fine (2002, Chapter 6) where the SOP approach has to address the historical (non-commodity consumption), consumer society and the culture of consumption which is not in and of itself single-commodity bound.

11 Pirie (2011) and Guthman and DuPuis (2006).

12 It will be worth following the consequences of the recently introduced tax on fat in Denmark.

... To cultural systems

But how do healthy eating campaigns affect food beliefs and behaviour? Here, I began with a number of critical points of departure. First is to reject the notion of a targeted ideal diet as motivating consumers. Rather the determinants of consumption are as varied as the SOPs to which they are attached, and dietary ideals play at most one part amongst many in determining what is consumed. Indeed, it is far from clear that consumers know what they consume however much they count calories, pieces of fruit and veg and the like. Second is to reject the notion that consumers are uninformed because, in some nostalgic and romantic fashion, they are much further distant from knowledge of food as producers, rural inhabitants or whatever. Indeed, the modern schoolchild knows much more, if different, about food than most peasants that have ever lived, since many of food's properties (and effects) are now common knowledge having only been subject to recent discovery. These two points of departure led me both to reject Fischler's renowned omnivore's paradox (as we can eat everything how do we know what is safe to eat) and to replace it by the 'diet paradox' instead (Fine, 1993, 1998c). We all have a diet but it is not and, indeed, cannot be a targeted diet other than *in extremis* of measuring whatever passes our lips, and is absorbed or excreted.

Third, then, as critical point of departure if verging on the mundane, food beliefs derive not exclusively nor even primarily from struggling with deviations from a targeted diet which would themselves have been explained (inevitably by some sort of pathology of lack of understanding combined with lack of self-control) but from a multiplicity of sources of knowledge and experiences (including goods not nutritious to eat or drink as anthropologists would remind us). Food both constitutes and reflects social relations, processes, structures and agencies. But how, what and why? A starting point was made, in deference to healthy eating campaigns, with the idea of an information system attached to each food SOP (Fine, 1998c). In the context of broader sources of information, not least corporate and brand advertising, for example, it seeks to locate the favourable or unfavourable promotion of foods (or, as often as not, ingredients of foods, indicative of the diet paradox – eat less salt, people do not eat salt and decreasingly sugar and fat, etc., as they increasingly figure as ingredients).

It does not take much to realise that reducing food beliefs to information systems is at the very least terminologically inadequate. The pushing for this conclusion through an already open door came by yet another accident, the request to contribute a paper on gender and consumption. A literature research revealed a predominance of contributions, to some extent unexpected given anticipated emphasis on gendered goods, around alcoholism, smoking and eating disorders.

The latter in particular sparked my interest, leading me to find both sociological and psychological literatures to be informative but inadequate for their failure to confront the decisive role played by food systems in their modern form. In particular, I posed a political economy of eating disorders in which, it was argued, all individuals in at least advanced capitalism need to negotiate the simultaneous, unavoidable and increasingly powerful tensions both to diet and to eat, a decisive factor being the capacity of food systems to promote both of these not necessarily at one another's expense (Fine, 1995b, 1998c). This is not to reduce food beliefs, in the context of eating disorders or more generally, to these contradictory tensions, only to set a context for other factors, themselves contingent upon, but not reducible to, the food systems with which they interact or to which they are attached. The tensions to eat and to diet do not derive exclusively from food systems as such, individually and collectively, but each SOP has a very different relationship to these tensions that shifts over time.

If we are to take this any further, other than for those subject to some sort of reductionism to predetermined and located variables, it is necessary to commit to some sort of theory of the commodity. Up to this point, the SOP approach has in major part been presented in more or less neutral methodological and theoretical terms and was, indeed, deliberately designed to be of appeal as a malleable synthesis across diverse approaches, forging together particular contributions by fitting them within the frame of SOPs – as single horizontal factors variously distributed across SOPs or as, possibly unwitting and very common especially in historical work, vertical narratives of particular SOPs. After all, the first and main messages were vertical as opposed to horizontal framing of consumption and appropriate balance between material and cultural factors, meaning relatively less of the latter in isolation. But such factors have to be properly conceived and debated.

Given my own methodological predispositions, it is hardly surprising that I should turn to Marxist value theory, especially in its qualitative dimensions, with attention focused on commodity fetishism. For Marx, the commodity form fails to reveal directly the social relations of its production. Indeed, it reifies them as a relationship between things or, more exactly, as a price or quantity of money. More generally, though, the life of the commodity prior to sale is at most partially revealed in the act of sale, purchase and use in terms of materials and technology used, and the social and material environment and character of provision along the chain as a whole. It follows that the commodity is fetishised in every aspect of its use value and not just in the labour (as value) relations underpinning its production. Of course, this has induced the high priests of sign value to suggest that use value can float entirely free from material properties (of what and how provided), the polar opposite of the notion that use value is merely a fixed

physical property beloved of neoclassical economics. Neither extreme can be so, for consumers engage in more or less conscious material practices with the use values purchased in the activities of and surrounding consumption which are not merely symbolic.

The issue, then, is how use values are created materially and culturally through the consumption that is remote from economic circulation and reproduction as a whole. The latter qualification is important because, whilst meaning is equally endowed to means of production, their consumption remains subordinate to continued incorporation within a value-producing context. This is not so for the consumer and, as with commodity fetishism in the narrow sense, it is a matter of what and how material practices of provision and use are culturally represented and received. In this respect, there are two classic approaches, and oppositions, that have fallen into disrepute, if making something of a comeback in more refined form (e.g. Schor, 2007). These are to appeal to hidden persuaders as opposed to consumer sovereignty, and to false as opposed to genuine needs. Both approaches are now accepted to be methodologically limited and oversimplified. In addition, although each does reflect material practices, they are lacking in dynamism.

Here, Haug's (1986) notion of aesthetic illusion is salient since it suggests that the *degradation* of use values that accompanies capitalist production is compensated for to sustain sales by endowing them with a sexual content, not least through advertising. The SOP approach to consumption takes Haug's notion of aesthetic illusion (the gap between what the use value is and how it is presented) as another critical point of departure in three ways. *First*, the material transformation of commodities through capitalist accumulation is vital but it is not confined to, nor even predominantly, degradation of given products either through the production process or raw materials used. These can also be enhanced unless we fall victims of nostalgia for an idealised craftwork (as opposed to the historical realities of adulterated commodities, poor raw materials, and antediluvian technologies). *Second*, each element along the chain of provision, and not just production and retailing, has an influence on the nature of the product (transport and storage – and corresponding freshness – for example, quite apart from design and advertising in the very broadest sense). *Third*, the potential filling out of the aesthetic illusion is equally by no means confined either to compensating for changes in production alone or to dependence upon sexuality alone as any number of qualities can be assigned to use values by numbers of agents, nor does the aesthetic illusion draw exclusively from advertising.

Of course, the cultural content of the commodity is not only related to the material system of provision but also to wider cultural influences such as gender, class, and nationality. How do these all fit together? One answer has been to appeal to the notion of a 'circuit' of culture, originally deriving from du Gay et al (1996). This does incorporate the important insight that the origins of influence on the cultural content of commodities are multiple, and derive from each and every aspect connected to the provisioning of the commodity (and not just advertising and the shifting material nature of the commodity). But it is not clear why the metaphor of a circuit is justified, and none has been offered. Does culture come and go, or simply return for reworking at a later date having been transformed by others?

Rather than a *circuit* of culture as organising principle, the SOP approach has suggested that each SOP is also attached to its own integral cultural *system*. The cultural system derives content from each and every material aspect of the SOP, although it does so in ways that are not rigidly predetermined. This is to move from the material structures and processes that condition the cultural system attached to commodities to the nature of that culture itself. In part, this is because consumers are not passive recipients of the culture attached to commodities (or anything else for that matter) but are what might be termed reflexive. But to coin a phrase, they are not reflexive in circumstances chosen by themselves. The most immediate, if not exclusive, external determinant of that reflexivity is the SOP itself. But, clearly, it cannot dictate how consumers reflect upon what they consume although its agents are usually determined to exercise an influence in pursuit of successful sales. Further, consumers engage in a variety of practices around consumption that are not necessarily reducible to consumption itself, as in family meals, display, emulation and distinction, and so on (Warde, 2005). Thus, the provisioning of a commodity is not the sole determinant of its attributes, those that make up its aesthetic content, illusory or otherwise (Fine, 2007b).

This is already to have entered the huge domain of the study of ideology, culture and so on. The SOP approach to consumption has done so by characterising the cultural systems attached to commodities as incorporating ten Cs (initially five but incrementally expanded)¹³. The culture of consumption is Constructed,

13 I have added two from before the conference, Commodified and Conforming, on my own initiative. Others were suggested such as Chimerical, Markus Walz, Communicative, Community-substituting, Colonising, Conquering, Corporate, Concealing, Catastrophic, Congressional, Conciliatory, Cathartic, Constricted, Alan Bradshaw, and Coercive, Conventional, and Commonsensical from myself. Even where these Cs are not Covered by, or the Consequences, of others, or not generally applicable to all cultural systems attached to systems of provision, I have to stop

Construed, Conforming, Commodified, Contextual, Contradictory, Chaotic, Closed, Contested and Collective¹⁴.

That the cultural systems attached to consumption are Constructed is probably uncontroversial in view of the postmodernist inclination to deconstruct them. The issue is what is constructed and how and with what effects, and especially the incorporation of the interaction between material and reflexive content. The latter implies that the culture system can never be the pure product of external forces upon the manipulated consumer (nor vice-versa). But, once again, what are the material and cultural boundaries which constrain reflexivity? Such reflexivity always involves individual responses so that the cultural system is Construed at that level.

Even in dream worlds, the culture of consumption is Conforming. This is not necessarily, or even primarily, a matter of the manipulated consumer, weaned off 'true' to false needs. Rather whether and how consumers make choices, and the meanings of these and their consumption to them, are not in circumstances of their choosing. So the culture of consumption is not fixed, nor selected from a fixed menu, as consumption and its purveyance are endlessly inventive. But this does not mean that anything goes, not least with anti-consumerism itself drawn out of an alter ego to consumerism. And, in particular in these terms although there are many other origins and forms of conforming, consumer culture is Commodified. Again, this is not a rigid determination with the commodity form of consumption dictating flexibility around what is consumed and with what meaning but equally constrained by the imperatives of profit-making along the system of provision. And, even where consumption is not commercialised, its culture again tends to be constructed in relation to its opposition to commerce – as in home-made which, of course, can be used as a selling point itself.

Further, as each SOP and its associated cultural system are contingently formed, both their material content and associated meanings are Contextual, the same object of consumption, such as a McDonald's hamburger, can have both different material and cultural content in different situations, and these be differently determined too. Cultural systems are also Contradictory in the dialectical sense of being subject to underlying tensions that need to be resolved

somewhere and ten Cs seems to round things off. Otherwise, subject to alphabetical limitations, there is a danger of reproducing all the elements that go into (the psychology) of marketing and more.

¹⁴ I have somewhat cautiously and reluctantly extended this approach from consumption to identity, uncertain of the scope of application of what was then the 8Cs beyond consumption, Fine (2009b). See also Fine (2012b) for the full ten Cs applied to ethical systems (in the context of economics).

at a more complex level and that drive change. In the SOP study of food systems, as mentioned, it was found that eating disorders are a consequence of its success in creating a symbiosis between the compulsions to eat and to diet, see above. How these and other tensions are resolved, for both other foods and for other SOPs, is equally differentiated. Fashion in contemporary capitalism is, for example, always caught between the demands for novelty, differentiation, emulation and cheap mass production.

Correspondingly and not surprisingly, cultural systems are Chaotic in the sense of being riddled with inconsistency of belief and action although not, thereby, arbitrary. This is inevitable given, for example, compulsions to eat and to diet as far as food systems are concerned (not least with the 'heavy/lite' syndrome in which health and unhealthy food feed off one another – a diet coke justifies a hamburger). A cultural system is also Closed in the sense that its ways of constructing meanings, beliefs and actions tend to preclude but not necessarily to prohibit others. Just think of trade-marking, standards, branding, regulations, and so on, not just what they are but how they are made and who gets to make them. Nonetheless, cultural systems are Contested both indirectly in terms of the conditions attached to the material practices along the chain as well as directly over the way in which these are endowed with meaning. What do we mean by fair trade for example? Each cultural system is Collective, despite individual reflexivity, in the sense of reflecting social practices that are themselves communicated through meaning.

It might at this point be thought attractive to add an eleventh C, Class. But this should not be privileged as an element in cultural systems of consumption any more than gender, ethnicity or whatever. As consumption is driven by the commodity form, it is the capacity and willingness to pay that is the most important proximate quantitative determinant. Whilst income, and lifestyle, do have some correspondence to class position, this is sufficiently loose and variable across SOPs that class as such is not an immediate determinate of corresponding cultural systems or even patterns of consumption¹⁵. In short, although class is an important determinant of consumption, it is at most, and not inevitably, a proximate determinant of corresponding cultural systems. Think TVs, washing machines, haircuts, phones, and so on. It would be hard to find a class culture in these that prevails, like writing in a stick of rock, especially distinctive from income levels and other determinants.

15 See Fine et al (1996) in critique of Tomlinson and Warde (1993), and see Friedland et al. (2007).

And from ANT to ...

Although described over a decade ago by Leslie and Reimer (1999: 405) as 'perhaps the most comprehensive elaboration of production-consumption relations', and as one of three approaches to the study of consumption, and cited as such in Jackson et al. (2004: 8), the SOP approach is more marked by its limited application and profile. It has, though, prompted criticism from time-to-time. The food systems literature, especially associated with Friedman and McMichael for example, was earlier established than the SOP approach and offered some inspiration for it. But it experienced a crisis of confidence in the early 1990s because of the failure of the empirical evidence to conform to a few, relatively fixed ideal-types of globalised commodity systems around wheat and beef for example. This, alongside the anticipated fracturing of food systems with the emergence of bio-technology, threw the whole approach into disarray. The less rigid SOP approach, which did allow for differences in national and product food systems, was roundly condemned by erstwhile global 'foodies'¹⁶. Whilst some have now tempered this initially extreme reaction to the diversity and increasing complexity of food systems, others, led by David Goodman, sought refuge in the greater methodological openness of social theory and especially actor-network theory, accusing the SOP approach of undue reliance upon a social/natural dualism (Fine, 2003a, 2003b, 2004 and 2005b).

Significantly, the inspiration for the ANT assault on the SOP approach derives from Callon, who has long and explicitly rejected the notion of capitalism itself as an ideological construct of political economists (Fine, 2003b). More recently, ANT itself has been discarded in deference to performativity. In a paper on the anthropology of markets running to over sixty pages, but marked not for publication, Callon and Caliskan (2005) make no reference whatsoever to ANT, although it essentially reads and reduces contributions surveyed, however accurately and both positively and negatively, through that perspective. This is true of the formalist/substantivist debate within anthropology as well as commentary on the relative merits of the GCC/GVC, see below, and SOP approaches:

The rigidity of commodity chains approach is broken by Fine and Leopold's systems of provision perspective (Fine and Leopold, 1993; Fine, 2002). Their research focuses on the world of consumption and simultaneously studies the relations of production and exchange in sectorally specific systems of provision like those of food and garments. Although corrective of the over-simplification of commodity chains approach, and careful in not assuming that the disciplinary

¹⁶ See debate in special issue of *Review of International Political Economy*, 1994, 1(3): 519-86.

taxonomy of the social sciences are not necessarily followed by the agents of these systems of provisions, the approach still limits itself in registering what it calls the material limits defining the world of the system in individual sectors. What happens in the sector itself, how its markets are organized, its prices are set, networks built, research carried out are still left untouched in the systems of provision approach. (ibid.)

The last criticism is incomprehensible in terms of the 150 pages or so specifically devoted to the food and clothing systems in Fine and Leopold, and the subsequent work on sugar, meat and dairy systems, for example, referenced and drawn upon in Fine (2002).

...Through GCC/GVC...

There would, however, appear to be a close affinity between the global commodity chain, now global value chain, GCC/GVC and SOP approaches. Each emphasises attention to the chain of activities connecting production to consumption and how such a chain offers an integral form of commodity supply. But each approach has also evolved from different origins and with a different dynamic, with little or no dialogue between them let alone convergence.

The story of the GCC/GVC approach can be told in a number of ways, especially in light of what it excludes as opposed to what it includes, see Bair (2005) and special issue of *Economy and Society* (Gibbon et al., 2008) and, for critique, Bernstein and Campling (2006a and b). GCC/GVC began with an attempt to situate sector-specific production within world system theory. It did so through suggesting ideal-types of chains, initially buyer- and retailer-driven, highlighting an abiding concern with power and governance along chains. Inevitably, this two-fold classification proved inadequate to the empirical diversity of chains themselves, and the typology has been extended accordingly, with Gereffi et al (2005) an exemplary illustration in which five chains are teased out of the eight possibilities around the 2x2x2 classification of governance across high or low complexity, codification and capabilities along the chain. Thus, GCC/GVC research has been driven by an evolving classificatory scheme to accommodate the burgeoning case study evidence that otherwise fails to fit.

The commitment to empirical case study is the strong and driving factor in GCC/GVC research – follow the chain. Its counterpart is an extraordinary weakness in theory – in depth, consistency and rationale. No doubt its practitioners would strenuously disagree but they seem to have been subject to a syndrome of off-the-shelf appropriation of whatever theoretical fragments suit shifting empirical needs or intellectual fashions. Indeed, tongue in cheek, it is tempting to see the GCC/GVC approach as a reflection in its own mirror,

imposing theoretical governance over its unruly case studies by a chaotic assemblage of concepts. From the abstract of Gereffi et al (2005: 78), we get a clear idea of this¹⁷:

This article builds a theoretical framework to help explain governance patterns in global value chains. It draws on three streams of literature – transaction costs economics, production networks, and technological capability and firm-level learning – to identify three variables that play a large role in determining how global value chains are governed and change. These are: (1) the complexity of transactions, (2) the ability to codify transactions, and (3) the capabilities in the supply-base. The theory generates five types of global value chain governance – hierarchy, captive, relational, modular, and market – which range from high to low levels of explicit coordination and power asymmetry.

Thus, although not arbitrary, the choice and use of supportive theory are accidental, generally reflecting the idiosyncratic character of individual contributors and the rapidly changing fashions across social theory itself¹⁸. This begins with Gereffi and world systems theory but rapidly became captured by the flec-spec post-Fordism of those such as Kaplinsky and Humphrey for whom chain as *filière* proved irresistible. From there, we have witnessed various opportunistic attachments to those theories that uncomfortably weld the rigidity of ideal-type chains to flexible analytical frames to preclude charges of excessive determinism (and to fit the evolving evidence and analytical concerns such as governance). The result has been to place GCC/GVC in an analytical ghetto of its own making. Its practitioners have been highly active and with high profile but have increasingly collaborated rather than attracting an expanding band of followers and subject matter. On the one hand, the core determinism within the chains themselves, and corresponding case studies, deter those who would reject any model imposed on history – whether it be the dogged anything-could-have-been-small-scale openness but for history of Sabel and Zeitlin (2004) or the various post-postmodernisms of convention, performativity, and ANT. On the other hand, increasing sensibility of the GCC/GVC approach to the latter has deterred those who are attracted by the determinism of the chains, whether these be conventional or heterodox economists or economic sociologists¹⁹.

17 The GCC/GVC approach has also increasingly become policy-oriented, from World Systems to World Bank as it were. See Gereffi and Frederick (2010).

18 Although there is some attempt at convergence and consistency made through the GCC/GVC working group, www.globalvaluechains.org.

19 Note that the superficial appeal by Gereffi et al. (2005) to transaction costs, a flawed and limited approach to economic organisation, is an ideal illustration of many of the points offered here. Note also the corresponding lack of critical reflection on the GVC website in defining governance as non-market forms of coordination, counterposing market to non-market – where does ‘capital(ism)’ fit in this schema?

Such antipathy across the social sciences to the GCC/GVC approach, more by way of benign neglect than active critique, is reinforced by two further factors. First, the scope of the approach has been extremely limited by the nature and number of the case studies, a few sectors globally organised for final consumption. Despite origins in world systems theory, implications for the world system (and in the age of 'globalisation') have been notable for their absence not only in the systemic sense but also in implications for other sectors, from raw materials through to finance, e.g. those not destined for final consumption, and for the role of the state. As Bernstein and Campling (2006a: 240) put it²⁰:

the commodities on which current 'commodity studies' concentrate are above all those in the *realms of personal consumption*. In short, there is little interest in capital or producers' goods and intermediate goods, which are no less commodities than 'exotic' fruits air-freighted from the tropics to Northern supermarkets, branded coffees or clothing, or eco-tourism²¹.

Second, the GCC/GVC literature has been both parasitical and superficial in relation to the social theories on which it has drawn and has, consequently, had little to offer them in return. A particularly acute example of the lack of such broader self-reflection on the part of the GCC/GVC approach is its failure to examine what defines and determines the chains themselves with this generally taken as self-evident by virtue of case studies. This follows from an almost exclusive pre-occupation with 'vertical', follow-the-chain analysis, to which is added the coordination/governance of the given chain. But what of horizontal factors, both within and beyond the chains? Thus, not only no chains for steel, energy, transport and finance, etc, let alone health, education and welfare, but these also potentially fracture the integral nature of the chains that can be identified. For finance or, more exactly, financialisation for example, the rise of equity finance and of futures markets for commodities not only brings into question the functioning but also the definition of chains. Is it possible that along the chain factors may have become subordinate to across-chain financialisation?²² Similar considerations are raised by the attachment of chains to the horizontal factors attached to consumption and the consumer.

20 This limitation of the GCC/GVC approach was strong if implicit in the stand-off in policy analysis and debate for South Africa between Kaplinsky and others in ISP (1995) and Fine and Rustomjee (1997) and Fine (1995a).

21 Fine (2002) extends this point in relation to the wider domains of public sector systems of (state) provision in transport, energy, housing, and so on, see below.

22 As Rossman and Greenfield (2006: 2) put it, cited in Fine (2007a):

Of course, companies have always sought to maximize profit. What is new is the drive for profit through the elimination of productive capacity and employment. Transnational food processors, for example, now invest a significantly lower

This all explains why the use of social theory by the GCC/GVC approach must always be on the theoretical move, since if any element were more fully embraced it would expose the approach's limitations and/or ambiguities and inconsistencies. Whether it be convention, actor-network or other theory, it is only possible to anticipate frustration by their proponents, rather than delight, at the piecemeal and tardy fashion in which a particular stance has been adopted and applied. In this light, it is hardly surprising that consumption should have remained off the GCC/GVC agenda for so long despite the early incursions of the flec-spec/*filière* approach. For, whilst its post-Fordism emphasised small-batch production serving consumption in niche markets, it moved no further than this, certainly relative to the explosion of consumption studies inspired by postmodernism. Had such a cultural turn in consumption been adopted by the GCC/GVC approach, it would have swept away and not just been subordinated to what would have been perceived to be the economistic and reductionist attachment to ideal-type chains.

In contrast to GCC/GVC, then, the SOP approach originates with the study of consumption itself and, in this sense, traverses an analytical route in the opposite direction albeit very much more quickly if not instantaneously. As mentioned, Fine and Leopold (1993) argued that theories of consumption had developed in a horizontal fashion within disciplines and across variables (utility maximisation for economics, emulation and distinction for sociology, deconstruction of meaning for cultural studies and so on) and across commodities. Further, to integrate the various analyses together and the corresponding factors involved requires attention to specific commodity chains designated for consumption. Thus, from the outset, the SOP approach took consumption as its object of study, a vertical as opposed to a horizontal approach and, in addition, as a conscious reaction against postmodernist confinement of the study of consumption to the meaning of the consumed and to the consumer. These needed to be situated in relation to the whole chain of activity sourcing provision and, to that extent, restoring production to a position of prominence. Significantly, as observed earlier, the SOP approach had itself been prompted by an entirely different issue, the relationship between rising female labour market participation and patterns of ownership of putatively labour-saving consumer durables. The idea of one to fund the other through some consumerist logic was theoretically and empirically rejected for a complex understanding of the diverse nature and determination of

proportion of their profits in expanding productive capacity. Financial markets today directly reward companies for reducing payroll through closures, restructuring and outsourcing. This reflects the way in which financialization has driven the management of non-financial companies to 'act more like financial market players'.

See also Newman (2009).

consumption norms, and their attachment to the economic and social reproduction of the workforce (Fine, 1992).

In other words, the SOP approach sought both to identify complex patterns of consumption and to link them to systems of provision. Unlike the GCC/GVC approach, it rejected ideal-types to specify chains. Rather, the integral nature of individual SOPs, global or otherwise, is seen as contingent upon the socially and historically specific form taken by the accumulation of capital on which they are based and which give them their dynamic. This is not to abandon theory altogether nor to revert to a notion of Fordist mass production as the only model (nor the presumption that anything that is not Fordist in every respect must be post-Fordist). In contrast to the unambiguous departure of the GCC/GVC approach from Marxist value theory – ironic in view of the shift of nomenclature from commodity to value – the SOP approach retained Marxist value theory, and its theory of production. For this, though, Marxist theory places emphasis upon the drive either to fragment or to consolidate across sectors (economies of scale and scope, respectively, in orthodox terminology) dependent upon how competition is engaged. And the process of competition is itself structured according to access to finance, markets, design, technology, labour markets, and so on, and is historically contingent in how specific sectors evolve in relation to one another. Thus, to repeat, it is the structuring of accumulation in production and through to consumption in practice that is perceived to create SOPs, rather than these corresponding to ideal-types as for the GCC/GVC approach, thereby realising recognisable clothing (and fashion), food, housing, and transport systems²³.

...To the value of labour power

Whilst, then, emerging at much the same time, the GCC/GVC and SOP approaches have had little or no point of contact other than through the intermediary of food. But I now (re)turn to an entirely different issue, the relationship between the study of consumption and Marxist value theory that has erupted through a debate with Lebowitz²⁴. This debate focuses on the nature and determinants of the value of labour power, a topic that has immediate

23 And also, with Fine and Leopold (1993) noting the failure of postmodernist studies to address public consumption, seeking a corrective in terms of public sector systems of provision (PSSOPs) offered in Fine (2002). See also Bayliss and Fine (eds) (2008) for this in the context of, and in opposition to, privatisation.

24 This debate is one of three with Kincaid (2007, 2008 and 2009), Lapavistas (2009) and dos Santos (2009) and Lebowitz (2003, 2006 and 2010). See Fine (2008b, 2009a and 2010) and Fine and Saad-Filho (2008, 2009 and 2010).

connections to the study of consumption even though these have rarely been taken up if at all. Indeed, and it is a point of difference in the debate, for Lebowitz, the key issue and starting point is to emphasise how insufficient attention has been given to class struggle, especially at the point of production, both by Marx himself and Marxism, and that this is crucial in understanding the dynamics of capitalism in general and of the evolution of the rate of exploitation. For him, *Capital* is an account of what capital does, and not how labour resists and, thereby, influences outcomes. This leads him to put forward the concept of the 'degree of separation', to incorporate the notion that capitalists must divide and rule workers in order to prevent them from appropriating the surplus produced. The degree of separation is also decisive in determining the extent to which the productivity increase associated with capital accumulation is appropriated by capitalists (as relative surplus value) or by workers in defence of the value of labour power (which would imply higher levels of real consumption).

There is an issue, here, of whether this fairly represents Marx and Marxism in terms of the neglect of class struggle, especially in light of the labour process literature that has, admittedly gone into decline over the period of neo-liberalism, most notably through the twin assault on industrial relations and sociology (by human relations and resource management) in particular and political economy in general. But my starting point has been different. It has been to address more closely the determination of the value of labour-power, something that, as already indicated, has been sorely neglected in the Marxist tradition despite its importance, with almost absolute reliance upon Marx's own reference to moral and historical elements without going into further elaboration. Even on this narrow basis, however, there have been two different approaches to the value of labour power (although they are perceived to be equivalent within an inappropriately static equilibrium framework). One is to refer to the value of labour power as a value as with variable capital, most immediately as reflected in a quantity of money, with the value of wages oscillating around the value of labour power in practice. The other is to refer to a bundle of goods as standard, and their corresponding socially necessary labour-time of production. These are, of course, very different conceptualisations of the value of labour power as is sharply revealed by any increase in productivity. The first would lead to a reduction in the rate of profit since the wage as a bundle of use values would increase in proportion as values of commodities decrease other than labour power itself. The second would be at the opposite extreme, with the value of labour power reducing in proportion to productivity increase as the wage bundle remains unchanged. For Lebowitz, the degree of separation is decisive in determining where the outcome lies between these two extremes.

My position is different and differently motivated and tends to view Lebowitz's stance as bordering upon a tautology – the more the working class is united in struggle as represented in the 'degree of separation', the more it has to gain from productivity increase. There is also a dual aspect involved in my approach, corresponding to the two different ways of interpreting the value of labour power – as values or as use values. The first aspect concerns differentiation across labour markets. Without going into detail, there are a number different economic and social processes that differentiate the creation and occupation of positions within the production process (and the labour market more generally), and these flow in part from the imperatives of capitalist accumulation itself in terms of skills, hierarchies, and oppositional and organisational conflict in response to (re)organisation of the work process. Such differentiation, or segmentation as it is usually termed, is variously situated within and across firms, sectors, and occupations. At the very least, this means that the form taken by the value of labour power is not simply a standard enjoyed by all, but one that is determined according to the processes of, and responses to, the restructuring of employment. The value of labour power is not even an average from which there are divergences either side, in anything other than a numerical sense. Rather, the value of labour power is the result of a deeply structured and differentiated (re)positioning of the workforce in its economic and social relations as well as in its more narrowly defined rewards in terms of wage differentiation. Indeed, as argued in Fine (1998b)²⁵, labour market segmentation is not merely a matter of different segments of the workforce but differentially organised functioning *within* those segments by comparison with one another.

Before proceeding to the second aspect of how the value of labour power is to be interpreted, it is worth emphasising on the first aspect alone how difference with Lebowitz is generated. We do agree that I place class struggle at a lower level of abstraction than he does. For he sees it as located at the level of capital and labour as a whole, with the degree of separation reflecting, in aggregate or balance, the struggle at this level albeit made up of the varieties of more complex struggles across the economy. As a result, I am interpreted as denying the primacy of class struggle, and of deeming it to be contingent rather than necessary. This is not so for the following reasons. First, it is necessary to unpick the notion of abstraction into at least two different aspects²⁶ which often, but do not always, coincide²⁷.

25 See also debate with Fleetwood (2006) and Fine (2007c).

26 In addition, there are differences in the order of exposition and of investigation.

27 This is more fully explored in the debate with Kincaid with, for example, the law of the tendency of the rate of profit more abstract but of equal causal status to the counteracting tendencies (since both are systematic consequences of accumulation and production of relative surplus value).

One is the logical movement from more abstract or simple concepts to the more complex and concrete. We cannot have profit or price before we have surplus value and value, for example. The other is the causal relations between categories or factors. Here, irrespective of the causal status of class struggle, we can identify it as being differentially determined within production processes, across the economy, and in social and ideological contestation as well. Again, this is not at issue as could not be put clearer by Lebowitz (2010: 140):

I have no difficulty thinking about individual capitalists trying to divide and thereby weaken the workers they employ by, for example, using racism and sexism or by moving to greenfields or regions where trade unionism is constrained if not illegal; nor, are we lacking for examples of particular workers who struggle to reduce the degree of separation among themselves in complex and differentiated ways. Accordingly, there would seem to be a *prima facie* case for accepting that the degree of separation among workers (this inner abstraction meant to capture the balance of class forces) is realized through the daily struggles of capitalists and workers.

But it is the last sentence where we depart analytical company. For this inner abstraction is not one that is reproduced through material processes, and so is ideal. It is, to coin a phrase, a sack of potatoes of struggles that may or may not have any reinforcing solidarity so that there is no reason why the degree of separation should be reproduced as an abstract (that is simple, underlying) category. This is quite distinct from the determining role played by class struggle. Indeed, it is precisely because of the separation of the working class (and divide and rule across the organisation of production) emphasised by Lebowitz that means the degree of separation is both in form *and* essence, a complex category. There is a difference here with the rate of surplus value which can legitimately be taken to be an aggregate (and simple) social category. For it does offer a 'centre of gravity' around which there tends to be equalisation. This derives precisely from the unity displayed, inadvertently, by capital in its total circulation, in which capital would move to wherever individual rates of exploitation were higher than normal, even whilst reproducing a differentiated workforce. But there is no such equalising tendency amongst labour market conditions themselves (just as what makes for differences in labour markets in one place does not tend to have them replicated elsewhere – as if militancy were evened out across the economy by labour as opposed to capital, and otherwise there would be no discrimination in the labour market, for example, by gender and race and so on).

The second aspect in the determination of the value of labour power concerns the wage as a bundle of use values, commonly perceived as a material standard of living. Here, I have emphasised three points. *First*, the way in which that standard is established is different from one commodity to another (and in relation to elements of economic and social reproduction that are not produced

by capital directly whether provided by the state or in commodity form outside of capitalist production). More specifically, as above, I have argued that the wage bundle is comprised of a number of separate systems of provision, such as the food, health, housing and transport systems, with these complemented by what I have termed public sector systems of provision, Fine and Leopold (1993), Fine (2002, 2005a and c, 2009c and 2012a), Bayliss and Fine (eds) (2008) and Fine and Hall (2012). *Second*, within each system of provision, norms are established which are neither the same for all nor even an average, but a distinctive mode of provision with corresponding incidence of levels and quality of consumption across different social groups. So, the nature of the moral and historical element is different both within and between different items within the consumption bundle.

Third, then, the way in which the different systems of provision establish the moral and historical element is certainly contingent upon class struggle, and upon the overall value of labour power as it evolves over time. But it is not reducible to, even if stretched beyond class conflict at the point of production, as a causal role is played by elements along each of the systems of provision as a whole, along which (in the links between production and consumption) influence is exerted upon, and interacts with, the levels and incidence of norms for consumption and associated cultural systems. Thus, whilst the value of labour power is given at any moment as an abstract and simple determinant, as accumulation proceeds, so the reproduction and transformation of that value of labour power is determined at the more complex level of differentially segmented and functioning labour markets and the differentiated systems of provision attached to differentiated standards of consumption.

In short, the moral and historical element in the value of labour power as a material standard of living – as opposed to a level of social necessary labour-time – is not determined by class struggle alone, not by production alone, not by conflict between capital and labour alone, and is differentially determined across different elements of consumption (and labour markets). Consequently, it follows that, if the degree of separation is taken as the measure of the extent to which productivity increase is appropriated by the working class, it is an extremely complex and concrete determinant and not one that is logically located at a high level of abstraction such as the value of labour power itself around which, to reiterate, the circulation of (surplus) value revolves and, from which, the complex determinants of the moral and historical elements can be abstracted.

From consumption to consumer politics?

Are these debates merely academic? The answer is no to the extent that theory sheds light on consumer politics, itself a tricky notion ranging from bread riots to anxieties over quality testing of consumer products. At one extreme, it is more closely aligned to notions of regulation in the narrow and traditional sense, with consumer protection sought through the intervention of the state, even more so with the privatisation and consumerising of public services (although there are claims that highly concentrated retailers now serve as regulatory gatekeepers on behalf of consumers). As Hilton (2007a) has suggested, such regulation has been inspired, at least in principle, by different models according to the perceived degree and scope of activism of consumers. The minimalist, economic model directs itself at restoring consumer sovereignty through correcting market failures. More extensive is the model of consumers as an interest group, capable of being represented in negotiations. This, in turn, can be taken further with consumer groups actively engaging in political campaigning.

In practice, whatever model is adopted in principle, it is highly conditioned by other forms of state regulation, itself uneven within and across countries. Further, across the European Union, apart from greater or lesser regulation of safety and standards, the tendency has been to harmonise across the lowest common denominator in consumer participation, with consumer (i.e. market, i.e. producer) choice prevailing over wider considerations in creating a 'single market'. But, according to the SOP approach, the cultures, practices and causes and consequences of consumer politics will be as diverse as the SOPs themselves. It follows, then, that state regulation of and through consumption is both diverse and not rigidly determined in light of the politics of consumption, especially in the United States, with increasing emphasis there and elsewhere being placed on both corporate and consumerist deployment of the media and communication for which high profile US branding and campaigning are universally unavoidable²⁸.

28 See especially Shah et al. (2007) and Livingstone and Lunt (2007). For this and more on a wider terrain, see for example the special issues in *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 2007, 7(2), Bevir and Trentmann (eds.) and *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 611, May, 2007. For critique of ethical consumption from a GCC/GVC perspective, see Richey and Ponte (2011). And for a recent diverse set of contributions to consumer studies, see results of the ESRC/AHRB *Cultures of Consumption Programme*, www.consume.bbk.ac.uk, for which I served under various capacities prompted by Frank Trentmann. This, in turn, kept my interest in consumption ticking over, subsequently reinforced by joining the Social Science Research Committee of the UK's Food Standards Agency.

What these approaches seem to share in common is the idea that if only there were more consumer activism of the right type, outcomes could be manipulated from bad or good to better, with the politics of consumption as a lever, most overt in the campaign for example, even literally, to get shit out of hamburgers, Thompson (2007). But elsewhere, Fine (2005a), I have argued that the latter is self-limiting for the following reasons. *First*, as we are all consumers, consumer politics is caught in the contradiction of presenting particular interests as if they were general, and this cannot be sustained the more effective the politics becomes and particular interests are promoted, defended or contested. Of course, this is not unique to *consumer* politics as the same is true of citizenship, human rights, and, within and even across borders, nationality, and so on. Thus, the most basic consumer politics of campaigning against higher prices tends to identify manufacturers, retailers, even government as purveyor of taxes and subsidies, as 'the other'. But to be defined as opposition is equally to fragment the universal category of the consumer and to open up the need for a unity of organisation and purpose that includes some and excludes others, and which will give consumer campaigns their constituencies, content and meanings.

A prominent way of addressing the impact of consumer politics and campaigns is by reference to a dualism between consumer and citizen, and the extent to which and ways in which the concerns of the latter are brought to bear upon the hedonistic self-interest of the former. Of course, the citizen is as much a general category as the consumer and is bedevilled by the same issue of whom and in whose interests. At one extreme, higher income does allow for a continued ethical and/or selective hedonism for the concerned consumer (Soper, 2007). At the other extreme, it can lead to active political campaigning that reaches back along the chain of material and cultural provision. As we are all consumers and citizens, so whom and what are *we* seeking to change? On the one hand, as the determinants of consumption are traced back to their origins and confronted by campaigning, so the nature of the politics is transformed into something else. The focus shifts from consumption as such to different and possibly wider concerns for the labour market and exploitation, or for the precedence of profit over the environment. The most notable, but unnoticed, example of this is the conversion of private into public consumption at which point the politics becomes one no longer of consumption but of the welfare state. It is significant that the contemporary process of privatisation of public services is one based upon not only recommodifying but also of what might be termed consumerising²⁹.

29 It is also arguable that the idea of the public (and hence collective) interest, although itself problematic, is being diluted by the notion of citizen-consumer. For the latter,

On the other hand, engaging the issues that underpin the politics of consumption also changes the constituencies that are prepared to be involved. In other words, to the extent that the politics of consumption moves beyond consumption as such, it not only becomes the politics of something else (as well), it also fractures the cosy unanimity of the consumer-citizen for a more focused and contested political constituency. The history of consumer politics is one of trading universal appeal against broader objectives and narrower interest groups³⁰. And so it must remain although where and how that trade-off remains is almost inevitably commodity-specific. Even for trade boycotts (and 'buycotts'), for example, as in anti-apartheid (and ethical goods), issues arise of how readily country of origin can be identified and acted upon, with corresponding trade-offs between ethics, convenience and effectiveness for the consumer.

Thus, whilst it might be agreed with Arnould (2007: 108) in closing that, 'to engage in progressive political action, consumer citizens need to escape neither consumption nor the market', Micheletti and Stolle (2007: 172) suggest in offering a survey of anti-sweatshop movements that, 'The question is how sharp antisweatshop's teeth are and how big of a bite it really can make into corporations'. Their answer immediately follows,

To succeed, the movement must continue to mobilize consumers as supporters, as critical shopping mass, as a spearhead force of corporate change, and as ontological agents of deeper structural change. (ibid.)

But, once the appeal is made to the consumer-citizen as an ontological agent of deeper structural change, this is surely an expression of the limitations, not of the scope, of consumerism (and citizenship) as agent in and against the market!

Second, then, consumer politics is not only about price and quality but also concerns the ethics of consumption itself, ranging from sustainability of the environment to the working conditions and wages of sweatshops and child labour. This implies, once again, not only that the consumer's politics are differentiated by issue and constituency but, even if not recognised as such, the

citizenship becomes better consumption by means other than through the market alone. For the public interest and citizenship as such, there is a potentially stronger attachment to notions of rights and equity, Livingstone and Lunt (2007).

³⁰ One of the author's uncle was instrumental in founding the UK Consumers Association, now known for its testing of, and advising on, products for its members, and reporting as such through its magazine Which. At its outset, that it should even challenge the quality of products and the domain of producers was seen as an assault on corporations tantamount to communism. This had a profound impact on its (contested) depoliticisation towards consumer testing as opposed to even campaigning as an advocate of consumer rights. See Hilton (2007b).

consumer is also prised away from the market and attached to social issues more generally. The consumer becomes a citizen and, correspondingly, the politics becomes broader and different, not least attaching itself to a discourse of rights and needs as opposed to equality (and inequality) before the market alone.

Third, as consumer politics evolves, it inevitably traces its concerns not only across the broader terrain of citizenship but also backwards to the origins of products in the systems of production, distribution and exchange. This can lead to, or even be inspired by, antipathy to private provision, with demand for public provision instead as with health, education, and so on. It can depart the narrow focus on the product and its terms of availability to address, as mentioned, conditions of work and concern for the environment. The result is to reinforce the tensions across the consumer/citizen and universal/particular interests and divides and to transform consumer politics into something else that further reinforces those tensions and divides. For, in case of *public* consumption (notably absent from postmodernist, discursive accounts of *private* consumption), the issue becomes one of the welfare state (and, not surprisingly, commercialisation of public services is concerned to present citizens as consumers and not vice-versa). Otherwise, it is a matter of, for example, trade unionism and the environmental movement. Consumer politics is limited in practice not only in what it does but in its very existence because it becomes different and something else the more it is collectively pursued and succeeds. An analogy, not identity, with trade union economism is striking and should lead to an acknowledgement of both the significance and limitations of consumer politics for prompting broader economic and social change.

Much the same must be true of the struggles and conflicts that will arise in the wake of the current crisis of neoliberalism with these not necessarily originating with, but ranging beyond and dominating, consumer concerns to address employment, wages, social provision, and so on. Of necessity, progress requires framing the way in which strategic alliances might be formed that strengthen, broaden, unify and transform such individualised struggles not only for more provision but also for different modes of provision that reach beyond the market to the conscious, collective and social control of production itself. In this respect, there are developments that have been overwhelmingly significant at both global and systemic levels. Two striking markers of these are, for example, the extreme shifts in the redistribution of income across the USA over the last thirty years, whereby the share of the top 1% has risen from well under 10% to well over 20% whilst real wages have stagnated. The implications for levels and details of

consumption are profound, not least in rendering the notion of trickle-down somewhat questionable to say the least³¹.

This period has also witnessed the growth in the ratio of global financial assets to global GDP by a factor of three, a symbol of the process of financialisation with its proliferation of quantities and types of financial assets. This, too, has had profound implications for consumption, not least through the penetration of finance into economic and social reproduction (consumer credit as a form of access to consumer goods as such as well as health, education, welfare and pensions as forms of erstwhile public provision). For Lapavistas (2009) and dos Santos (2009), this signifies a supplementary form of exploitation within exchange as banks unduly profit from (interest) charges of wage revenue. I disagree, seeing this instead, in line with the earlier arguments presented here, as a form of redefining the value of labour power in which finance is a more prominent factor in the constituency of SOPs. Of necessity, how finance intervenes is differentiated both by commodity and time and place. Thus, sub-prime in the USA is both indicative and exceptional in terms of both how finance has been integrated into housing provision and the impact it has had on housing provision itself (who gets access to what housing). By the same token, SOPs across various commodities, such as food and energy, have been subject to the volatilities of futures markets with corresponding consequences for access to consumption.

In short, just as consumer politics needs to reach back through the SOP to the realm of production, so it needs to address the systemic role of finance – not simply as a consumed service but as a decisive determinant in the levels, modes and means of consuming itself. But, as already emphasised, such demands upon consumer politics transform it into something else.

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³¹ See also Fine and Leopold (1993) for trickle-up for specific commodities such as jeans, from work wear to fashion item.

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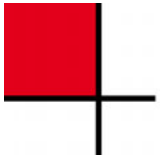
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The dialectics of progress: Irish ‘belatedness’ and the politics of prosperity

Kate Soper

abstract

It has been said that prior to the emergence of the ‘Celtic Tiger’, Ireland’s deficient modernisation occasioned anxious ruminations among historians and sociologists on the ways in which it had remained an uncanny site of the ‘pre-modern’, despite its location astride the highway of Euro-American modernity. And yet in the eyes of others, this uncanny backwardness was trans-valued and recreated as the island’s greatest resource – as a kind of sublime ‘alternative to the world’, a place outside the mainstream of development (Cleary, 2005). With particular reference to the Irish case, this text reflects on the ‘dialectics of development’; the mutations of the recent boom and recession years; and the implications for any project of ‘sustainable consumption’. Drawing on my ‘alternative hedonist’ position, it will argue for the need to counter ‘modernisation’ construed as commitment to the growth model of prosperity with its economic and social adaptation to the constraints of the global capitalist market. Thus far, it will aspire to an ‘alternative to the world’ associated with traditional romantic antipathy to the modern, and present this as an essential condition of a just and sustainable future. But in doing so, it will also denounce the puritanical and socially conservative aspects of traditional cultures of resistance to modernity, and argue for the importance of associating avant-garde social policy with a post-consumerist politics of prosperity. It will conclude by asking whether Ireland might now be in a position to move in such a direction, and thus show the way to an unprecedented form of supercession of the earlier old-new divide.

Modernisation has always hitherto been associated with economic expansion and industrial development. Economic growth and the extension of the market have also proved the predisposing vehicles of enlightened social and sexual policies, secularisation, and progressive cultural movements. What counts as modern is progressive, and economic growth has been its condition.

But faced as we are now with an environmental crisis that demands revision of the unquestioned commitment to market driven growth, and a profound shift of thinking about the nature of prosperity, this set of associations begins to look strained, and to our children's children is likely to seem very outdated. A programme for sustainable consumption ought now to be seen as 'progressive' precisely in virtue of its critique of the anachronistic growth model of the economy with its dependency on an ever expanding and resource intensive consumer culture. Admittedly, those eco-modernisers who emphasise the potential for sustainable development will challenge this picture. Yet it remains very unclear how growth at anything like the rates currently conceived as 'healthy' could be achieved indefinitely. Let us recall that in the recent boom years between 1995 and 1998 growth in world economic output exceeded that during the entire 10,000 year period from the dawn of agriculture to the start of the 20th century, and then consider how far an expansion at that rate could continue. Growth at only 2.5 percent each year from 2050 to the end of the century would more than triple the global economy beyond the 2050 level, requiring (if it were to prove sustainable) almost complete de-carbonisation of every last dollar (Jackson, 2008: 43; cf. 2004, 2009; Victor, 2009; Purdy, 2005).

A just and sustainable global economy will therefore require a break with affluence as currently construed and the general adoption of less work-dominated and more materially reproductive ways of living. It is important to emphasise the role of justice here. This is because greater global equality will be essential to any enduring economic system. But it is also because without a fairer division of wealth at the national level there is unlikely to be any significant electoral support for an alternative politics of prosperity. A more egalitarian order in Europe is in this sense a pre-condition for the development of a new culture of thinking about sustainability – which is why, at present, one must welcome any political shifts, such as Hollande's recent victory in France, that are likely to advance rather than hinder that cause. These claims have been at the centre of the argument I and others have developed in recent years around the concept of 'alternative hedonism', and I shall come back at a later point to say rather more on it.

But in the first instance, since this paper has been written for a conference in Ireland during a period of deep recession, I want to take up a rather different aspect of 'modernisation', namely the culturally contested relationship to it of nations, such as Ireland, whose history is one of colonisation and victimisation by the modernising imperial power. In Ireland, by reason of its subordination to the exemplary modern state, modernity has been viewed, it has been said, as something imposed from outside, as a 'gift' of colonial or religious conquest mediated primarily through an expanding British state rather than as something

brought about through a pre-existing Gaelic society on its own terms and through its own exertions (Cleary, 2005: 3). Gaelic culture thus came to be seen as archaic or pre-Modern relative to the Anglicising influence, and, as such, to be either transcended or preserved, depending on the particular political sentiment and cultural loyalties of the observer. De Valera, for example, in the 1930s-40s associated the republican and nationalist cause with celebration of a pre-Modern Ireland of 'saints and scholars', a place distinguished by its spirituality rather than its economic advance or progressive social policy. As he famously put it on the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Gaelic League in his St Patrick's Day speech of 1943:

The ideal Ireland that we would have, the Ireland that we dreamed of, would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis for right living, of a people who, satisfied with frugal comfort, devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit – a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. The home, in short, of a people living the life that God desires that men should live. (c.f. MacArthur, 199: 218-220)

Or in Yeats' Anglo-Irish and more aristocratic-aesthetic vision, Ireland was to be valued as a place that had escaped the general corruption of a secular modernity; his image or fantasy was of an Ireland spiritually opposed to what he saw as an unholy trinity of British materialism, middle-class mass culture and orthodox Christianity. Expanding on the point, he wrote:

In Ireland wherever the Gaelic tongue is still spoken, and to some little extent where it is not, the people live according to a tradition of life that existed before the world surrendered to the competition of merchants and to the vulgarity that has been founded on it; and we who would keep the Gaelic tongue and Gaelic memories and Gaelic habits of our mind would keep them, as I think, that we may one day spread a tradition of life that would build up neither great wealth nor great poverty, that makes the arts a natural expression of life that permits even common men to understand good art and high thinking and to have the fine manners these things can give. (Yeats, 1975: 245, cit. Nolan, 2005: 158)

But for many others, of course, Irish backwardness ('the most belated race in Europe' quipped James Joyce (1901) with fond irony) was part of the problem of Anglo-Irish relations, not the transcendence of it. It was an insult to be defied and sublated rather than re-worked and re-valued; Ireland's aberrant relationship to capitalism was regarded as indicative of something anomalous and in need of correction; and there were also, of course, many who, without necessarily being great friends of capitalism, and broadly supportive of the nationalist cause, found the endorsement of a pre-Modern Ireland associated with that cause hugely problematic, not least in virtue of its social conservatism and offensive gender

politics. The preservationist impulse towards Gaelic Ireland was also condemned as reinforcing English hegemony by colluding in the imperialist's sentimental patronage (Kiberd, 2009: 45-8). Summarising reactions to this complexly contested cultural politics, Joe Cleary writes:

Political economists over the last two centuries have consistently remarked upon the many ways in which Ireland can be seen to depart from those pathways to capitalist development regarded as normal in the Western world (...) [and they have been] left to debate whether Ireland had failed political economy or political economy had failed Ireland. (...) Histories and sociologies of Irish modernity frequently turn into extended deliberations on Ireland's deficient modernisation, anxious ruminations on the ways in which Irish society had remained an uncanny site of the 'pre-modern' or the 'non-modern', despite its location astride the very highway of Euro-American modernity. (...) But for others, this uncanny backwardness was trans-valued and recreated as its greatest resource. (...) The country was construed as a sublime periphery to the European mainstream, a place that was out of the world, beyond the world, an alternative to the world. (Cleary 2005: 9-10)

This vision of Ireland as an 'alternative to the world' was, as Cleary goes on to point out, largely discredited with independence and from the 1960s onwards, the state sought multinational corporate investment and EU membership (which it attained in 1973); and this led onto a more general convergence, culturally and economically, with other Western societies. Yet Ireland, until relatively recently, still managed to retain something of its image as a welcome respite from the complexities of the modern world. A place, it has been said, where 'history fades against its much sung landscape of rocky coastlines, rolling grasslands, misted mountain ranges, boglands and moor' (Cleary and Connolly, 2005: xiiv) and the country paradoxically comes 'to represent both the romantic pleasures of solitude and seclusion and traditional virtues of conversation, sociability and close-knit communities' (ibid.).

This chimes with my own personal experience as a regular visitor to Ireland who over 35 years enjoyed it for its rural landscape, and, yes, its entrepreneurial sluggishness. I did not love everything about Ireland, and I could see that England was richer, yet I had this sense that the Irish in certain respects knew 'how to live'. Caricatured as it often was (as, notably, in the postcard images of sheep and cattle on the road in 'rush hour' Ireland), its relatively leisured pace was attractive, and in many ways a 'green' advance on what was happening in Britain¹. At a pre-postmodernist and less complexly mediated moment, however,

1 One of the many ironies of the 'dialectics of modernity' today is the contemporary revaluation of the Slow Food, Slow City, Slow Travel movements and other endorsements of the more leisured and hence sustainable existence to which we need now to aspire; another is the opportunity this provides for tapping new sources of revenue from Ireland's relative commercial belatedness. For the Irish are indeed

I myself nourished a fond idea that Ireland, by reason of a certain cultural sophistication and *savoir vivre*, might avoid ‘over-development’, and reveal to the world a rather different model of how to do prosperity. I hoped, in other words, that it might become less socially conservative, and even, finally, offer a decent cup of coffee, while yet managing a development that would mediate and temper the worst ravages of neo-liberal capitalism².

Such fanciful ideas were to be swept aside with the extreme economic deregulation of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ years (when, far from curbing reliance on the car, transport energy use in fact increased by 181% and the infamous motorway was driven through the Hill of Tara, leading Bertie Ahern to dismiss all objections to such road building as being about ‘swans, snails and people hanging out of trees’ (O’Toole, 2009: 187). Instead of moving towards a more sustainable development, Ireland propelled itself into the forefront of what the ‘modernising’ programme had then become, namely, adaptation to the economic and social constraints of the global capitalist market. Indeed, it found itself suddenly feted for its neo-liberal advancement relative to other centres of commerce by whom it had a few years previously been derided for its backwardness. For a brief period, as Fintan O’Toole has put it, ‘the globalised Irish economy had itself become a global brand’, with Ahern’s speech on ‘the Irish model of development’ much in demand (O’Toole, 2009: 8)³.

Of course, that moment in turn was not to last very long, and when the boom gave way to recession, the follies and corruption of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ mode of modernising capitalism were more fully exposed (Allen, 2007a, 2007b; O’Toole, 2009). Among its other effects was the creation of a huge abyss between the wealthy elite and the rest of the population of a kind that had already taken place

‘adept at turning other people’s dewy-eyed images of them to profitable use’ (Eagleton, 2012). The Irish Tourist Board’s current website (www.discoverireland.com) features a modishly retro sheep-congested rural road (‘Its true. We have our own traffic problems...’) and invites visitors to ‘escape the madness’ of London 2012: ‘You don’t have to wait on crowded platforms. You don’t have to join the snaking queues. You don’t have to lose your cool. You can escape to a world of empty beaches and green fields. A world of quietly winding country lanes and friendly faces. Abandon the petrol fumes for fresh air, exchange rush hour for happy hour’.

- 2 The emergence of what one lifestyle magazine of the period referred to as the ‘Cappuccino Celts’ did seem a kind of advance. James Joyce, we might note, had much earlier joked that Ireland would only be liberated when you could get a decent cup of coffee on every street (Kiberd, 2009: 237).
- 3 Cf. the case study of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ conducted by Eileen Roche in the Harvard Business Review (Roche, 2005), a study used, so I am told, to teach management executives. To date, there has been no follow up from the HBR.

elsewhere (in 1995-2006 the wealth of the top 1% grew by 75 billion euros and held 20% of the country's wealth, with the top 5% holding 40%). In 2003 alone the small oligopoly of development landowners made 6.6 billion euros profit, with farmers and others making 11 billion from selling land, most of it funded by taxpayers, to the state. Ireland, it has been said, returned to being an almost feudal state in which land values were the highest in Europe (six times more than in England in 2007) and ownership in land conferred untold wealth (O'Toole, 2009: 102-5). Meanwhile the surplus of unaffordable or unwanted houses rose to 250,00 with 30% of homes in Leitrim vacant on the night of 2006 census.

But all this is now well known, and in its essentials no departure from the usual course of boom and bust capitalism with its material legacy of new, but never occupied building and half-completed construction work. This is the 'junk space' subject to Alzheimer-like deterioration described by the architect, Rem Koolhaas (cf. Jamieson, 2003). Or as David Harvey pointed out some time ago now, capitalism 'builds a physical landscape appropriate to its own condition at a particular moment in time, only to have to destroy it, usually in the course of a crisis, at a subsequent point in time' (Harvey, 1989: 93). The point, in any case, should not be to single out any particular economy but rather to note the irrational – and, to repeat, unsustainable and hence dangerous – commitment to such undialectical conceptions of prosperity. Yet even in the wake of the crash and a looming crisis of resources, no major political party in Europe has acknowledged this, nor even broached the idea that we might need now to reconsider that commitment.

The current crisis, the most serious since the 1930s, and still unfolding in unpredictable ways, has certainly caused some misgivings about continuing as we are. But these have amounted to little more than feeble expressions of hope that the greediest financiers will content themselves with a little less. And 'growth' is still clung to as the panacea. Only by stimulating the economy, so it is argued, by producing and persuading people to consume more, by fixing credit at rates that might allow them to borrow and hence buy more, can we hope to spend our way out of a crisis largely precipitated by the dynamic of borrowing and spending in the first place. The great fear generated by the Stern and other reports on global warming (one voiced by Stern himself) was that growth would falter if we failed to attend to the environmental damage caused by continuous growth. And the common presumption of all these ways of thinking is that the consumerist model of the 'good life' is the one we want to promote and that any curb on that will prove unwelcome and distressing. Very little is said of what might be gained by pursuing a less work driven and acquisitive way of life. We are held captive, it seems, to a consumerist version of well-being that excludes all other ideas of how to live and prosper.

It is in this context that I have been pressing for what I have termed the 'alternative hedonist' approach to winning support for sustainable lifestyles and for forms of governance promoting them. This responds to the current situation not only as a crisis, and by no means only as presaging future gloom and doom, but as offering an opportunity to advance beyond a mode of life that is not just environmentally disastrous but also in many respects unpleasurable and self-denying. Alternative hedonism is premised, in fact, on the idea that even if the consumerist lifestyle were indefinitely sustainable it would not enhance human happiness and well-being (or not beyond a certain point that has already past). And it claims that it is new forms of desire, rather than fears of ecological disaster that are likely to have most impact in any move towards more sustainable modes of consuming. The seductive depiction of alternatives to resource-intensive, polluting and unhealthy consumerist life-styles is therefore critical not only to meeting commitments on climate change but also to building any more substantial opposition in the future to the current economic order. A counter-consumerist ethic and politics must appeal, not only to altruistic compassion and environmental concern, but also to the self-regarding gratifications of consuming differently⁴.

The emphasis on pleasure rather than austerity distinguishes the alternative hedonist critique from those in the tradition of Plato and Aristotle who have condemned luxury and commerce as a corruption of republican virtue, and praised the 'simple' and ascetic lifestyle – a tradition that still has echoes today in some religious teachings and certain sects that reject contemporary materialism (Sekora, 1997; Berry, 1994). It is also distinctive in seeking legitimation for its claims *not* in some supposedly objective knowledge of 'true' needs (that only an elite of theorists have access to...) but in the embryonic forms of ambivalence about consumer culture that consumers themselves are now beginning to experience. The focus is on newly emerging or imagined needs, and their implications for the development of a new electoral mandate for the forms of self-policing essential to sustainable living. It is, after all, now widely recognised that our so-called 'good life' is a major cause of stress and ill health. It subjects us to high levels of noise and stench, and generates vast amounts of junk. Its work routines and modes of commerce mean that many people for most of their lives begin their days in traffic jams or overcrowded trains and buses, and then spend much of the rest of them glued to the computer screen, often engaged in

4 For some development of this argument, see (Soper, 2007; 2008; Soper and Trentmann, 2008; Soper, Ryle and Thomas, 2009). Support for my research on 'alternative hedonism' was provided by the ESRC-AHRC 'Cultures of consumption' Programme ('Alternative Hedonism and the Theory and Politics of Consumption', reference no.: RES-154-25-005. Further details at: www.consume.bbk.ac.uk).

mind-numbing tasks. A good part of its productive activity locks time into the creation of a material culture of ever faster production turnovers and built-in obsolescence, which pre-empts more worthy, enduring or entrancing forms of human fulfillment.

This is a dynamic that tends to the elimination of non-commodified forms of satisfaction only then to profit from the sale of compensatory goods or services⁵. Economic 'progress' has become ever more dependent on our preparedness to spend the money we earn by working too hard and too long on the goods which help to provide the satisfaction we have increasingly sacrificed through over-work and over-production. The post 9/11 calls for 'patriotic' shopping; the more recent car scrappage schemes; the appeals to spend our way out of the credit crunch, and so forth, these moves all testify to this dependency. The message today is: whatever happens, don't stop shopping! And it is a message aided by the billions spent on advertising, and the more or less total veto on other representations of desire and pleasure: a veto daily sustained in all our mainstream media outlets, dependent as they are on advertising revenue⁶, and reinforced by the discourse on prosperity of all the mainstream political parties. With little or no restraint from government, companies continue to pressurise us into environmentally vandalising forms of consumption; they now spend a fortune grooming children for a life of consumption (Schor, 2004); and they have very readily moved in on, and defused the radicalism, of social movements such as feminism (Littler, 2009).

Yet despite the well-nigh totalitarian hold of commercial culture on the hedonist imagination, there are signs of desire for something other than the high-stress, work dominated existence. Aggressive advertising is now widely criticized and noted as a factor in the recent riots in Britain, where a cross party report on the causes of the riots found that 77 % of those questioned thought that too much branding and advertising was aimed at the young (Boffey, 2012). Media reports and other sources now indicate that many people are beginning to sense – and resent – the contradiction between what they are forced to do in order to survive, and how they would really prefer to live (Schor, 1991, 1999; Levett, 2003; Bunting, 2004; Honore, 2005; Shah, 2005; Thomas, 2008, 2009). And a

5 The stress relieving spa and therapy industries; the luxury holidays that sell you back 'quality' time; the services that do your 'home cooking' for you; the multiplication of gyms to which people drive in order to do treadmill walking, the extreme sports that take you back to nature, and so forth.

6 For more than a decade, the anti-consumerist campaigning group, Adbusters, has been trying to buy airtime for its social marketing TV spots, often called 'un-commercials', and have been regularly rejected by CBS, NBC, ABC, FOX, MTV, and major networks around the world.

growing number of campaigns testify to those now opting for a slower pace, 'downshifting', reduced working hours and more sustainable lifestyles⁷. This subjective sense of disenchantment is also supported by recent researches on occupational ill-health and depression, by evidence on the links between greater equality of income and improved well-being (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009) and by empirical studies that contest the presumed correlation between increased wealth and increased happiness and indicate something inherently self-defeating in the pursuit of ever more consumption (Brown and Kasser, 2005; Kasser, 2002, 2007). It is true that the simple lack of a correlation between higher income and increased reported life satisfaction does not in itself entail that more consumption has not improved well-being. The standards used by people in assessing their level of satisfaction may themselves become more stringent as their life experience changes with increased income. Nor are feelings of satisfaction always the best guide to how well people may be faring. Education has often exposed alienation and served the cause of personal emancipation precisely by generating discontent. The learning of skills may lead to increased dissatisfaction and demands on the self as one makes progress in their acquisition.

Happiness, in short, is an elusive concept, and it is difficult to pronounce on its quality or the extent to which it (and its associated states of pleasure, well-being or satisfaction), has been achieved. What should count in the estimation of the 'good life'? The intensity of its isolated moments of pleasure, or its overall level of contentment? The avoidance of pain and difficulty, or their successful overcoming? And who, finally, is best placed to decide on whether personal well-being has increased: is this entirely a matter of subjective report, or is it open to objective appraisal? Where Utilitarians have looked to a 'hedonic calculus' of subjectively experienced pleasure or avoidance of pain in assessing life satisfaction, the more objectively oriented Aristotelian focus has been on capacities, functions and achievements (with what one has been enabled to do with one's life) rather than with its more immediate feelings of gratification. And they would argue that people are not necessarily the best judges of what conduces to their own happiness. Aristotelians have also claimed that a 'happiness' conceived or measured in terms of subjective feeling discourages the development of the republican sentiment and inter-generational solidarity essential to social and environmental well-being (O'Neill, 2008, 2006). Yet the

7 www.slowfood.org.uk; 'Slow City' (www.cittaslow.net; www.cittaslow.org.uk; the 'New American Dream' www.newdream.org; 'The Idle Foundation' (www.idlefoundation.org/). See also, the International Centre for Anti-Consumption Research at: <http://www.business.auckland.ac.nz/uoa/home/about/our-research/bs-research-groups/international-centre-for-anti-consumption-research-icar>).

Utilitarian 'hedonic calculus' need not rule out the more civically oriented forms of felt pleasure, or the subjective gratifications of consuming in socially and environmentally responsible ways. The pleasure of many activities, riding a bike for example, include both immediately personal sensual enjoyments and those which come from not contributing to social harms – in this case, the danger and damage of car driving. Moreover, it is difficult in the last analysis to legitimate claims about well-being without some element of subjective endorsement on the part of those about whom they are being made.

There is certainly a tension between these two approaches. The focus on the having of good feelings risks overlooking the more objective constituents of the 'good life' and the 'good society'; the Aristotelian emphasis does justice to those constituents but runs the risk of patronage and condoning the superior knowingness of experts over individuals themselves. But to accept the complexity of gauging claims about the quality of life and personal satisfaction is one thing. To deny that today there is any evidence of the self-defeating nature of ever expanding consumption would be quite another, and both sides to the hedonist debate are, in fact, in general agreement that happiness does not lie in the endless accumulation of more stuff. And though it cannot resolve the philosophical issues in this area, the alternative hedonist perspective, by highlighting the narratives about pleasure and well-being that are implicit in the emerging forms of disaffection with affluent culture, seeks to open up a post-consumerist optic on the 'good life' while still respecting felt experience. As indicated earlier, it offers in this sense an immanent critique of consumer culture. It is not a theory about what ought to be needed, or desired, or actually consumed, but a theory about what some consumers are themselves beginning to discover about the 'counter' consumerist aspects of their own needs and preferences⁸. To invoke Raymond Williams's concept (Williams, 1977: 132 cf. 128-136), its main interest is in an emerging 'structure of feeling' that is both troubled by what was previously taken more for granted, and aware, if only dimly, of former pleasures that are going missing, or other possible gratifications that are unlikely now to become available.

8 Those espousing the ecological cause are in general pretty good at diagnosing what has gone wrong and informing us of what is needed in order to put it right. In the *Limits to growth* we are told, for example, that: 'People don't need enormous cars; they need respect. They don't need closetfuls of clothes; they need to feel attractive and they need excitement and variety and beauty. People don't need electronic entertainment; they need something worthwhile to do with their lives. And so forth' (Meadows, 1972: 216). But it is one thing to claim knowledge of what is 'really' needed. It is quite another thing to reveal in what sense, if any, these are indeed the 'needs' of consumers; and another again to show by what agencies and transitional means they might be more universally acknowledged and acted upon.

This is somewhat in contrast to the critique of commodification associated with Marxism and Frankfurt School Critical Theory whose main emphasis was on the construction or manipulation of consumer 'needs' and wants and not on the critical reflexivity of consumers themselves. In the classical Marxist argument the market had protracted its domination by subverting the will to resist it, or to enjoy any system of pleasures other than the one it provided. Resistance was thus theorised as prompted solely by the exploitations of the workplace, while consumption, viewed as essentially determined and controlled by production, was regarded as exercising a placating influence, and as tending to reconcile consumers to the existing order rather than firing them to oppose it. This politics, moreover, in its most orthodox form, was directed primarily at transforming the relationships of ownership and control over industrial production rather than at the quality and methods of production as such; it was about equalising access to consumption, rather than revolutionising its culture. In this situation, labour militancy and trade union activity in the West became confined to protection of income and employees' rights within the existing structures of globalised capital, and did little to challenge, let alone transform, the 'work and spend' dynamic of affluent cultures. Comparably, in Eastern Europe during the Soviet regime, the aspiration was to 'catch up and overtake' the form of industrial development associated with capitalism rather than to revolutionise the goals of prosperity itself.

The alternative hedonist argument also invites a rather more civically oriented conception of consumer needs/desires than is captured in the prevailing spectrum of theoretical perspectives. For whether consumers are viewed as manipulated and constructed by trans-individual systemic market pressures or as existentially authentic and heroically self-creating - in other words, whether viewed as 'unfree' puppets of the system or as 'freely' self-styling, they are not conceived as capable of rising above their formation by market pressures in order to assume, as many now do, a more ethical and socially accountable stance towards their own consumption. What is missing is the more complex and nuanced theoretical understanding required to accommodate the troubled and equivocal forms of reaction to the consumer society with which I am concerned here, and which, I would argue, complicate or transgress the 'consumer-citizen' divide as currently conceived.

Let me make clear, too, that counter to some anti-consumerist critiques, I do not presume that the 'excesses' of modern consumption can be corrected through a return to a simpler, objectively knowable, and supposedly more 'natural' *modus vivendi*. The critique associated with 'alternative hedonism' does not deny the complexity of human desires, nor the need to accommodate the distinctively human quests for novelty, excitement, distraction, self-expression and the

gratifications of *amour propre*. It can even allow that the gratification of what Rousseau termed the '*fureur de se distinguer*' – the zeal for self-distinction which he associated with *amour propre* – is most easily supplied through shopping and consumerist forms of acquisition and display (at least if you have the money for them). But what comes more easily is not necessarily the most rewarding or fulfilling, and in deflecting complex needs and demands on to commodified sources of satisfaction, consumer culture is hedonistically more restrictive than permissive⁹.

Conclusion

Breaking with the growth-driven consumerist dynamic of production and satisfaction is, admittedly, a daunting prospect given the integrated structure of modern existence and the dependencies of national economies on the globalized system. It is an index of the depth of our collective alienation, that we scarcely know how we might begin to achieve it. But a cultural preliminary, I suggest, will be some re-thinking of our current notions of 'progress' and 'development'. We cannot dismiss the advances in democracy and social and sexual emancipation that have accompanied the development of market society and mass production. Nor can we deny the limitations imposed by an earlier and more parochial existence on individual self-realisation¹⁰. But we can certainly be critical of the constraints that the market has now in turn placed on personal pleasure and fulfillment both in and out of the work place.

Notable in this connection is a growing resentment of the centrality of work in people's lives, and its displacement as a source of individual well-being. Today the ideology of work as providing dignity and meaning in life is all too often belied by its failure to supply any worthwhile ethic, and allegiances to it have shifted accordingly. The new pressures of 'digital Taylorism', the 'self-commodification' of workers forced to gear everything to job-seeking and career, the current impact of the vocational ethos in education, and the sheer tedium and pointlessness of much of the work performed: such factors have prompted increasing numbers to view paid work, although needed as a source of income, as frustrating rather than enhancing self-expression and individual fulfillment

9 For its tendency is to seek to accommodate all the more irreducibly symbolic and affective dimensions of human need, whether for the more sensual or the more cerebral fulfilments, by treating them on the model of physiological need: as if they were, indeed, mere extensions or complications of that need, and could be met, for the most part, through the provision of tangible objects.

10 Cf. in this connection, Marx's account of pre-capitalist economic formations in his *Grundrisse* (Marx, 1973: 471-514).

(Gorz, 1999, 1989, 1985; Hochschild, 1997; Fevre, 2003; Erickson, 2010; Frayne 2012).

Given such developments – and against the grain of the politicians and business magnates who denounce green policies for taking us ‘back to the stone age’ – a more genuinely progressive cultural outlook would recast certain forms of retrospection and nostalgia as potentially *avant garde*. For there *is* a politically progressive role for keeping faith with past ways of doing and making, provided it is not too absolutist; and provided it comes in the form of a retrospection or lament that retains a memory of the social and sexual exploitations of the labour processes of earlier communities as well as of their more congenial aspects. The ‘romantic pre-technical world was permeated with misery, toil, and filth,’ as Marcuse has told us, but it did also provide what he calls ‘a “landscape”, a medium of libidinal experience’: it provided for sustainable sources of gratification that have either gone altogether or are now fast disappearing (Marcuse, 1986: 72-3 cf. Williams, 1993: 36-7, 184; Ryle, 2009a).

One such libidinal medium is craft ways of working, which by reason of their emphasis on skill, attention to detail, and personal involvement run counter to prevailing views on the mental-manual division of labour (cf. Sennett, 2008) and the time line imperatives of the ‘work and spend’ economy. In a slower paced society, craft based production could expand and many more would be able to benefit from the particular forms of concentration in work and self-fulfilment it can provide. They would also enjoy more disposable time – time, as André Gorz has argued, that would not so much exempt people from doing anything at all, but open up possibilities for everyone to engage in a host of individual or collective, private or public activities – activities which no longer need to be profitable in order to flourish (André Gorz, 1999: 100; cf. Purdy, 2007; Raventos, 2007). Instead of treating idleness and free time as threats to prosperity we should begin, then, to see them as the forms in which prosperity can be realised. Instead of promoting education as a forcing house for the economy we should defend it as the place to prepare individuals to enjoy the free time made available in a post consumerist era. And instead of downgrading and marginalising aesthetic resources and satisfactions we need to be making them culturally much more central and universally available.

Along with such developments could come other forms of revaluation of the ways that space and time figure in our lives: for example, longer but more local holidays (rather than the five mini-breaks per annum in far flung places stipulated by Lastminute.com); a more leisured – and safer – urban existence; more encouragement to street loitering and conviviality (note the encouragement

given to this by certain public art works such as Anish Kapoor's sky mirrors, which invite more enjoyable and relaxed forms of being in urban space without the need for any purchase to be made). A slower paced society could also commit to a more selective use of modern technologies (investing, for example, in advanced medicine, green IT communications systems and energy provision, expansion of public transport, avant-garde bicycle engineering and design, but avoiding those dependent on fossil fuels and catering to high speed lifestyles). It would also do much more to encourage re-cycling, inventive bricolage, more self-sufficiency in food growing, less emphasis on fashion following, more on eccentric self-styling, and so forth.

This would be a form of 'modernisation' that would undo the link between 'progress' and economic expansion without the accompanying cultural regression and social conservatism. In place of a stadial and evolutionist conception of history, it would offer a more complex narrative on the old-new divide, a transcendence of the current binary opposition between 'progress' and 'nostalgia'. Nations that had once figured as relatively 'backwards' might reconstitute themselves in such a period of historical transition and conceptual reconstruction as in the vanguard by comparison with the 'over-development' characteristic of the imperial powers or metropolitan centres that had once rendered them marginal and pre-modern by comparison. Joe Cleary (to revert once more to his argument) has suggested (citing the role of the United Irishmen in 1793 as an instance) that peripheral nations can on occasion function as sites of an 'alternative Enlightenment' where ideas of the modern are intellectually tested, creatively extended, radicalised and transformed, and indeed transferred eventually to the metropolitan centre (Cleary, 2005: 6). This chimes with Joyce's speculation on Ireland:

had we been allowed to develop our own civilisation instead of this mock English one imposed on us, and which has never suited us, think of what an original, interesting civilisation we might have produced. (cit. Kiberd, 2009: 33)

Indeed, one might note in passing here (it is an argument to be developed elsewhere), the potential contribution of Irish literature to this revised frame of thinking about relations between old and new, indigenous to imported culture. Emer Nolan has argued that *Ulysses* demonstrates a mode in which 'the archaic and the avant-garde may enter into explosively creative conjunction' and presents it as a book in which 'the notion of the emancipatory power of the modern is interrogated, indeed put under considerable pressure, rather than one in which the modern is uncritically ratified' (Nolan, 2005: 165). Declan Kiberd has argued similarly in his reclamation of *Ulysses* as a guide on how to live. Kiberd himself laments the 'lost world' of social democracy, modernist painting and *Ulysses* now superseded by 'the identikit shopping mall, the ubiquitous security camera and

the celebrity biography'. And he wryly notes that when teaching *Ulysses* in California, his students thought that Mr Bloom must be ill because he was doing so much walking...! (2009: 24).¹¹ John McGahern is another writer to mention in this context. Comparably to that of Hardy, though in its own, quite distinctive and more contemporary mode, McGahern's fiction is richly dialectical in its treatment of the rural-urban and past-present divides (cf. Ryle, 2009b)¹².

Might Ireland, then, today be in a position to draw upon its peculiar history of relations to modernity, and its exceptional literary resources, in order to pioneer a new way of thinking about the politics of prosperity in the post boom-and-bust era? Might it, for example, now commit to a more mediated culture of modernisation: one that retained the commitment to social emancipation while at the same time reconstituting – and re-working in a distinctively post-consumerist mode – something of the earlier romantic spirit of sober consumption and prioritisation of spiritual over material gratification? (To avoid misunderstanding, I would emphasise the role of conceptual reconstruction here, and the break with earlier notions of both 'spirituality' and of 'material' well-being that would necessarily be involved.)¹³

Such questions are obviously highly speculative. But to indulge them is to entertain the idea of a cultural shift that played on the idea of Ireland's particular – if rather indefinable – 'difference' in its relations to modernisation, but in a manner that allowed definitive transcendence of the colonised/victimised other positioning relative to the imperial power. And within that optic one might then regard the unqualified embrace of neo-liberal capitalist 'development' in the Celtic Tiger years as a still too Anglicised and neo-colonial 'moment' (in the Hegelian sense of 'moment') in the completion of modernisation and national

11 Bloom himself, however, can by no means be considered a straightforward guide in this context, being both ad man and advocate of technological advance as well as a figure of republican virtue; he is also, of course, a 'dialectical' counter of some kind to Stephen as the man of art... In what, as the author puts to his readers, did Stephen's and Bloom's views diverge? 'Stephen dissented openly from Bloom's views on the importance of dietary and civic self-help while Bloom dissented tacitly from Stephen's views on the eternal affirmation of the spirit of man in literature' (Joyce, 1992 (1922): 177; cf. Ryle and Soper, 2002, esp. 173-177).

12 Let us note, too, in this context the resistance of Beckett's characters to the capitalist norms of consumption and the imperative to consume (cf. Barry, 2006).

13 Not least of the difficulties in conceptualising these shifts is the lack of a vocabulary of the 'spirit' that does not come loaded with either religious, or mystical or ascetic connotations. Conversely, it is almost impossible to engage in critique of an overly 'materialist' consumption without it being assumed that one is advocating some less baroque and sensually enriching mode of existence.

autonomisation: a moment en route to a way of being that would have made it more successfully and authentically an 'alternative to the world'.

In many ways, I admit, this must look like a fanciful idea. And making headway with any such alternative within the nation state or more globally will undeniably be hugely difficult. Almost certainly, in the short-term we shall have a return to 'business as usual', with a few big 'green' infrastructure projects planned as a means of pump-priming our way out of recession and back into the promised land of growth, full employment and consumer spending. Yet the banking crisis has made the going harder for the advocates and representatives of greed, speculative cunning and profit-driven turbo-capitalism. It has strengthened the hand of interventionist, social-democratic government. Talk of a 'Green New Deal' has been heard outside the red/green circles where the phrase originated (see www.neweconomics.org); EU leaders have been speaking of the need to re-engineer international financial institutions in ways that would help combat climate change and keep world food prices down.

And since, we all know really that it is unrealistic to suppose that we can continue with current rates of expansion of production, work and material consumption over coming decades let alone into the next century, anything that contributes to a less hackneyed way of thinking about economic health and is more inventive about the quality of human well-being is surely to be welcomed.

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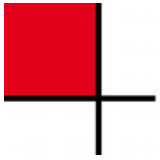
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Alienated consumption, the commodification of taste and disabling professionalism*

Peter Armstrong

abstract

The theory that the contemporary self is largely constituted in the sphere of consumption has become something of an orthodoxy in recent years. Against this view, it is argued that there are many areas of consumption in which taste has become commodified as expertise. The creation of a market for this expertise depends on a 'disabling professionalism' (Illich, 1977) which undermines the individual's confidence in, and capacity for, independent judgment. This process is illustrated here by means of two vignettes – the first from art collection at the millionaire level and the second from interior decoration at the level of the suburban semi-detached. In both cases the outcome is an alienation of consumption in that the tastes expressed are not the clients' own. Consumption here loses its capacity to express the individual's species-being, becoming objectified instead as a medium of social stratification. The concept of alienation is here defended from its critics by redefining it as an impairment of the capacity for collective intentionality. Whereas consumption possesses a potential for collective intentionality, this is negated when it is objectified as an exchange value which Bourdieu calls 'cultural capital'. In *Distinction*, however, Bourdieu's account of cultural capital as deriving from the practices of an 'aristocracy of culture' is unconvincing. As an alternative it is suggested that cultural capital is the product of alliances between cultural producers, critics, educators and commercial interests. It is these agencies which employ the tactics of disabling professionalism in the commodification of taste, thereby producing the alienation of consumption.

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Preliminary discussion: Towards a retrieval of alienation

Since this paper will make recourse to a relatively unreconstructed notion of alienation, a few preliminary observations are in order. As Costas and Fleming (2009: 354) have recently observed, the idea of alienation has suffered rough treatment at the hands of postmodern and post-structuralist critics, principally on account of its associations with essentialism and economic determinism. They do not exaggerate. For DuGay (1996: 18) alienation is an 'objectivist fantasy' whilst for Baudrillard (1988: 79), 'the concept of alienation is useless, by dint of its association with the metaphysic of the subject of consciousness.' Baudrillard goes on to dismiss the entire notion of a critique of the commodity form and assert the rival doctrine of the consuming self in a particularly peremptory declaration:

The division of labour, the functional division of the terms of discourse, does not mystify people; it socializes them and informs their exchange according to a general abstract model. The very concept of the individual is the product of this general system of exchange. (1988: loc.cit.)

Both DuGay's and Baudrillard's versions of anti-essentialism appeal to a semiotically (or discursively) formed subject whose capacities to understand and internalize signs (or language), are simply assumed, either implicitly or on the basis of the 'always already' formula. Human children, however, are not 'always already' in possession of language. According to Chomsky (1995: 15), they learn

about a word *an hour* from ages two to eight, with lexical items typically acquired on a single exposure, in highly ambiguous circumstances, but understood in delicate and extraordinary complexity that goes vastly beyond what is recorded in the most comprehensive dictionary'. (italics added)

The process by which they learn, moreover, is better described as a re-creation of language than a rote-learning of it (Fromkin and Rodman, 1988: 375-379). This being the case, the capacities assumed in the discursively constituted subject cannot simply be ignored and nor, it follows, can they be reconciled with a thoroughgoing anti-essentialism.

Quite what capacities enable human beings to create and acquire language is a matter for debate within and between Chomskian, cognitive and Vygotskian linguistics (Chomsky, 1995; Dirven, Hawkins and Sandikcioglu, 2001; Daniels, 1996). However, a minimum definition of both language and semiosis is the assignment of publicly-recognised 'status functions' (non-natural significations) to physical phenomena (vocalizations, marks on paper, material possessions, leisure activities). Assignments of this kind presuppose a capacity for collective intentionality (Searle, 1995: Ch. 3; Tomasello, 2008). 'Intentionality' here is a

rather broader concept than ‘intention’ in its ordinary meaning, and one antecedent to it. To take an intentional attitude toward something is to regard it as relevant to oneself in some way. Collective intentionality is what makes it possible for human beings to share the perception of a four-legged flat-topped object as a table, to assign it the name ‘table’ as a means of stabilizing that shared perception and thence for a group of them to form the collective intention to eat a meal off it. The ‘collective’ of ‘collective intentionality’ also calls for comment. It is not simply a shared attitude; it is one which includes the idea that it is (or should be) shared. Searle (1995: 24) describes it as a ‘We intentionality’ which cannot be reduced to an ‘I intentionality’, though see Miller (2007) for a note of dissent.

Collective intentionalities do not imply a kind of telepathy. They have to be created, and in the ordinary way of things this is accomplished through language. This, however, cannot universally be the case since language itself depends on shared status functions. Tomasello (2008: 6) suggests that its basis is a non-conventional gesture of two basic kinds: indication and pantomime. All of this is the subject of current research and debate in the field of child development (Rakoczy, 2007). Whether or not Searle (1995: 24) will turn out to have been justified in describing collective intentionality as a ‘biological primitive’, it is certainly a form of ‘species being’ (Marx, 1977: 81), and might even coincide with it. On that basis, it is not unreasonable to regard a minimum concept of alienation as impairment of the capacity for collective intentionality and/or of the capacity to express it in actual intentions.

Such an interpretation of alienation is more familiar than it may first appear. For Lukács, (1967 [1923]: 6) the rationalization of the process of production encourages a ‘contemplative attitude’ on the part of the worker (i.e. one in which intentionality is absent). This passivity subsequently generalizes to a reification in which the social world takes on the appearance of a juggernaut impervious to human intervention (Giddens, 1991: 139). The political corollary of this attitude is a fatalism in which social injustice, where it is perceived at all, is seen as an unalterable facet of the human condition (Popitz et al., 1969: 294ff.). In the light of this view of alienation, the anti-essentialist objection would appear to turn on a presumption that ‘human nature’ must take the form of specific instincts. On this interpretation, alienation involves a suppression of behaviours which are taken to be intrinsic to human being or, conversely, an enforcement of some which are alien to it. Against these interpretations of alienation, Skempton (2010: 99-101) convincingly quotes Marx to the effect that what is denied in the alienated condition is the very openness of cultural possibility which the anti-essentialist asserts. Contrary to the straw-man stereotype of postmodernism,

Marx's view of human nature is that set out in the economic and philosophical manuscripts of 1844:

Industry is the actual, historical relationship of nature, The nature which develops in human history — the genesis of human society — is man's real nature; hence nature as it develops through industry, even though in an estranged form, is true anthropological nature. (Marx, 1884: 9)

As explicated by Mészáros (1970: 10) this is a view of human nature as formed in a three-way interaction with industry and nature. Alienation then appears as a consequence of the 'mediations' (ibid: 14) of these dialectics by the capitalist social relations of production. Instead of being shaped into use values by human industry, 'nature' is now formed into commodities by alienated labour. The consequence is that 'human nature' is confronted with, and shaped by, the products of its own industry in the fetishized form of consumer goods. Either way, whether or not it is subject to these alienating mediations, human nature is given historically rather than biologically.

What is unstated here is that Mészáros' argument also leads to a culturally relative conception of 'human nature'. Since there are as many histories as there are human cultures, it follows that there are also as many human natures - which is exactly the position of the anti-essentialist who nevertheless objects to the whole notion of alienation. That said, it needs to be re-asserted that for Mészáros' dialectics to occur at all, there must remain an essentialism at a deeper level. What Mészáros calls 'the specific human relation to "industry" (taken in its most general sense as "productive activity")' (Mészáros, 1970: 10) and Marx calls 'species being', *must* entail some capacity to act collectively upon nature.

Alienation and 'the economic'

The postmodern accusation that economic determinism is implicit in the concept of alienation presumably relates to Marx's deduction of the alienation of labour from its commodification. In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (Marx, 1977: 75-87), it is *because* labour power is exchanged against capital that both the form of labour and its product is controlled by the capitalist rather than the worker. And it is *because* that product circulates as a commodity that the relationship between the producers of the means of subsistence 'takes on the fantastic form of a relationship between things', an illusion which Marx calls 'commodity fetishism.' (Marx, 1977: 435 ff.). It is this common root in the commodity form which binds together the otherwise disparate psychological and sociological manifestations of alienation.

As well as a preference for a metaphysics of disconnection, the postmodern objection to the 'economic determinism' of what is clearly a broad-brush characterization of capitalist social dynamics may be based on a misunderstanding. Long before Bhaskar's Critical Realism lent currency to the ideas of causal powers and 'mechanisms' (Bhaskar, 1978), it was understood within Marxist theory that its propositions were to be understood as 'laws of motion' rather than empirical generalizations. Simply because many such laws operate in any concrete situation, not all of them known, any one of them applies as a tendency which is subject to a *ceteris paribus* clause. For this reason, an economic determination does not imply an economically determined outcome. To take a concrete example, the commodification of labour need not involve its alienation in the particular case of creative labour, because 'creatives' may be employed precisely in order to cater for a niche market for self-expression. In such cases, the authority of the employer is either held in abeyance or exercised in the form of a demand for that self-same self-expression. The sheer fragility of such arrangements, the ease with which the employer's authority can be re-asserted - perhaps in the form of a demand that 'self-expression' must take forms for which there is an established market - serves only to confirm the causal mechanism which connects the commodification of labour to its alienation.

In following Lukàcs on the diffusion of alienation from the sphere of production into that of consumption and thence into everyday life, it is important to retain a sense of its origins in political economy (Lefebvre, 2000: 94, Debord, 1994: 13). Failure to do so leads in a number of directions, all of which converge on a reification of the social order. The first is a tendency (manifested in popular usages of the term) to regard alienation as inherent in social life as such, to identify it with the frustrations involved in adjusting to the desires and expectations of others. The effect here is to reify alienation as integral to the human condition as in Sartre's existentialism (Gardner, 2009: 183). Another route to the same conclusion is by way of an a-social Stirnerite anarchism: to think of de-alienation in terms of divesting the 'I' of everything that is 'not I' (Stirner, 1907: 214). In fact this is a move (assuming it were possible) which would neatly collapse de-alienation into the very definition of alienation as it is proposed here, because the aim is to annul any capacity for collective intentionality.

Both of the foregoing misreadings of alienation are a consequence of thinking of it as a negation or frustration of the individual will rather than collective intentionality. Yet another route to the same conclusion is by way of a decontextualization in which the socio-psychological symptoms of alienation appear to call for therapeutic intervention rather than political action. This was the trajectory of Horkheimer and Adorno as it is outlined by Held (1980: 40ff.).

By the time of the 1947 publication of *Dialectic of enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer's disillusion with the proletariat as an emancipatory potential had reached a point at which they felt it appropriate to express something close to contempt for the 'deceived masses' who 'insist on the very ideology which enslaves them' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 133-4). Having thus eliminated the prospect of de-alienation at any public level, Adorno thought his way to the conclusion that the only prospect of preserving even the vision of a rational society lay in the possibility that individuals – like himself presumably – might escape the entrapments of 'identity thinking' through the practice of 'negative dialectics' (Adorno, 1973; Held, 1980: 73). This, he thought, would be facilitated by a therapeutic engagement with 'autonomous art', the quiddity of which would serve to disrupt the categories of a pervasive and politically compromised discourse. For Adorno this meant the atonalities of Arnold Schoenberg (Adorno, 1981: 147-72), the novels of Franz Kafka (ibid: 243ff) and the plays of Samuel Becket (Adorno, 1973: 85-87). A more poignant symbol of the alienated intellectual would be difficult to imagine.

Alienation vs. active consumption

For the theorist of 'active consumption' (De Certeau, 1984), the concept of alienation is an illusion brought about by a patronizing dismissal by intellectuals of the capacity of human beings to express themselves through their purchases. On this view, the manner in which commodities are produced is secondary. What matters is their semiosis, whether designed into them or projected upon them by consumers in the course of constructing 'consuming identities'¹ (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006: 168). In this scheme of things, the question of alienation does not arise, firstly because theorists of active consumption tend also to be theorists of the decentered subject (e.g. DuGay, 1996: 86-92) and secondly because consumption is taken to be the dominant source of identity in a world where work is no longer a 'central life interest'. When Dubin (1958) first announced this latter discovery (more plausible as a statement of alienation than a refutation of it), there was at least no pretense that work itself was in the process of disappearing. For Bauman, however, (1992: 46) 'the eviction of productive activities to a fast-shrinking segment of society' is a matter of fact so obvious that it needs no supporting argument and certainly no citation of the relevant statistics. Thus freed from the inconvenient drag of evidence, he tells us that:

¹ Benwell and Stokoe (2006) actually use the phrase 'commodified identities' but this has been replaced because it carries the surely unintended connotation that the identities in question are commercially traded.

the room from which work has been evicted has not remained vacant. Consumer freedom has moved in... It now takes over the crucial role of the link which fastens together the life-worlds of individual agents and the purposeful rationality of the system. (Bauman, 1992: 49)

The contradictions neatly encapsulated in his phrase 'consumer freedom geared to the consumer market' (Bauman, 1992: loc.cit.) tell us much about a theoretical stance for which Adorno's (admittedly excessive) fulminations against the cultural industries are representative of an outmoded 'legislative' stance on the part of the intellectual (Bauman, 1992: 19-20). Alienation, on this view, is simply out of date. In postmodernity, so runs the argument, all the selfhood that is on offer is aptly symbolized by the catwalks of high fashion whereon models emaciated to the point of androgyny are granted a borrowed simulacrum of gender only by grace of the designer. Against this critique of alienation, Lefebvre argues that the notion of active consumption is itself an ideology: one which 'further[s] the cause of class strategy' by insinuating that the concept of alienation is itself an antiquated product of ideological 'conspiracies' (Lefebvre, 2000: 56, 94).

In fact the critique of active consumption anticipated the doctrine itself by many decades. For Simmel (1990 [1907]) the expansion of consumer choice resulted in a growing disparity between the subjective and objective aspects of culture – that which can be grasped by the individual and that which is embodied in a society's artefacts and records. Anticipating recent discussions of domestic objects as repositories of personal association (Kron, 1983), Simmel, (1990 [1907]: 459-60) suggests that the displacement of these by 'impersonal objects' conditions people into accepting an 'anti-individualistic social order'. 'Cultural objects,' he continues, 'increasingly evolve into an interconnected enclosed world that has increasingly fewer points at which the subjective soul can interpose its will and feelings' (Simmel (1990 [1907]: 460). This is as clear a statement of alienation in the sphere of consumption as one could wish. Far from facilitating an expression (or construction) of the self, consumption in a monetarized economy involves a loss of spontaneity since it 'enforces the necessity of continuous mathematical questions in our daily transactions . . . reducing qualitative values to quantitative ones' (Simmel (1990 [1907]: 444). For both Lukàcs and Simmel, the commodity form as experienced by the consumer reflects back on the commodity form as experienced by the worker. Thus

the reduction of all objects for the gratification of human needs to commodities stamps its imprint on the whole consciousness of man; his qualities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can 'own' or 'dispose of' like various objects in the external world. (Lukàcs, 1967: 14-15)

Simmel (1990 [1907]: 456) expresses the same idea.

As Fromm (1979: 29-30) has pointed out, this objectification of one's own capacities and proclivities is reflected in certain linguistic usages. Fromm's example is a passage in which Marx and Engels dissect the trope of possession by love. Instead of the active form in which a person is said to love, the state of loving is hypostasized as an alien force to which the individual is then subject. As a means of disclaiming both agency and responsibility, the image of possession by – or being in the grip of – powerful emotions is one of the 'metaphors we live by' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). As such, it clearly signifies an alienation from, and reification of, the emotion in question.

In the sphere of consumption the noun 'taste' has become the subject of a similar linguistic reification. In modern English the noun is ambiguous as between a sensation on the tongue and a preference. Significantly, the ambiguity does not extend to 'taste' as a verb. One can taste a bacon sandwich but not a painting of a bacon sandwich. The archaic active sense in which the verb 'taste' can mean 'experience a sample of' has been lost. An attempt to revive it nowadays would probably be understood as a metaphorical reference to taste-with-the-tongue. Along with its transition from verb to noun, 'taste' as preference has become taste as possession (which was Fromm's point). One speaks of a person as *having* taste. If one wants to use the word to speak of the act of aesthetic judgment, one must employ some such circumlocution as the 'exercise' of taste, or its 'expression'. Taste in action must be spoken of as if it were a kind of implement employed by the person whose taste it is. Thus modern English speaks of consumption in a manner which exactly parallels Lukàcs' observations on the alienation of human capacities which follows from the commodification of labour. The theorist who has done more than any other to conceptualize taste as a kind of possession, however, is Pierre Bourdieu, more specifically in his concept of cultural capital. Since this assertion may strike some as controversial, it needs elaboration.

Bourdieu on consumption: Cultural capital and alienation

As applied to the consumption of cultural artefacts (Bourdieu, 1984), Bourdieu's economy of practices (1990:122ff.) presupposes both a commercialization of taste and an alienation of consumption. What it lacks, at least as a theorization of cultural stratification at the level of an entire society, is a satisfactory account of the conditions under which taste can acquire a value (become cultural capital). According to Bourdieu, cultural capital is formed by an 'aristocracy of taste [who] only have to be what they are because the value of their practices derive from the value of those who practice them' (1984: 23-4). Against this, it will be argued that

cultural capital is formed in (competing) discourses of cultural inequality promulgated by alliances of cultural producers, critics and commercial interests.

For Bourdieu (1984) taste is commodified in the sense that it acquires an exchange value which he calls 'cultural capital'. By definition, the realization of this exchange value in quasi-commercial transactions constitutes alienation in the sense of a sale, but it is also an alienation in a number of existential senses. To the extent that cultural transactions are conscious, they require the individual to objectify their own relationships to cultural artefacts in ways which exactly parallel the objectifications of capacities which attend the commodification of labour. At the extreme, cultural consumption may be entirely driven by its public meaning (its exchange value), in which case alienation follows from the suppression and substitution of the dispositions native to the *habitus*. Nor is there an escape from alienation to be found in the privatised contemplation of 'autonomous' artworks (Adorno, 1973). In testifying to the refined sensibilities needed to appreciate them, the artefacts of 'high' culture have acquired a semiosis of inequality (Bourdieu, 1984: 31), an innocence of which is not to be recovered simply by wishing it were so.

In terms of the definition of alienation from species-being which was suggested earlier, the instrumentalization of taste as a signifier of cultural ascendancy entails a negation of collective intentionality. Cultural consumption as collective intentionality implies that it takes the form of participation in a community of appreciation. On the other hand, cultural consumption can only become cultural capital to the extent that what is consumed cannot be consumed by others (Bourdieu, 1984: 56). As Tolstoy sourly remarked, '[Beethoven's] 9th Symphony does not unite all mankind, but only a small group of it, which it separates from the rest' (c.f. Poggioli, 1968, p. 91-2).

The difference between intention and intentionality is important to the understanding of this point. Alienation as a negation of collective intentionality does not mean that it is only a possibility when cultural artefacts are the subjects of concrete intentions. In the Kantian terms which inflect Bourdieu's depiction of legitimate culture (1984: 41-53), the appreciation of a work of art is a form of intentionality which disavows actual intention. It is possible for such an intentionality to be collective where it consists of a common act of disinterested contemplation. For Bourdieu (1984: 53-4), this attitude is exclusionary in itself, since he believed it to be foreign to the *habitus* of those social strata which are subject to the stresses of necessity. However this may be, it is precisely this possibility of a common act of appreciation which is denied when cultural consumption is instrumentalized as cultural capital.

The formation of cultural capital

Notwithstanding its success in clarifying the manner in which cultural consumption can become detached from the *habitus* of the consumer, Bourdieu's sociology of cultural stratification lacks a satisfactory account of the formation of cultural capital. Attention to this entails a recognition of the role of cultural criticism in establishing the ascendancy of 'legitimate' culture and hence its ability to function as a form of capital. Various agencies participate in this work of criticism: educationalists, freelance critics and cultural producers themselves. Whatever their social location, however, and whatever disagreements may arise between them, these agencies share the common aim of attempting to define their own version of 'legitimate culture', as Bourdieu calls it (1984: 23, 53 etc.). At the apex of these definitions there stand those works which, in the words of Mathew Arnold, comprise 'the best that has been thought and said' (1999 [1869]: viii). Cultural capital consists in a connoisseur's appreciation of this legitimate culture, as manifested in a familiarity with its homologues, its internal vectors of influence and most of all in that confident familiarity which insists on superposing individual eccentricities onto conventional tastes.

For Mathew Arnold, as for Kant, the aforesaid 'best' stood in contrast to the 'barbarism' of popular taste (Bourdieu, 1984: 41), and it is a necessary condition of the formation of cultural capital 'that cultured people can believe in barbarism and persuade the barbarians of their own barbarity' (Bourdieu and Darbel, 1992: 179). It is this indispensable element of persuasion which connects cultural capital with what Ivan Illich called 'disabling professionalism' (1977). If people are to be induced to defer to tastes which they do not share (Bourdieu, 1984: 318), their relationship with their own tastes must, in some sense, be disabled. Through the agencies of cultural criticism, 'lower' tastes need to be constructed as objects of embarrassment, concealment and dissimulation. Even the critical formation of the cultivated person must involve such disablements. If the standards of legitimate culture are to be internalized, any contact with 'lower' pleasures must be the subject of a kind of aversion therapy, a sense that one is 'letting oneself down' which eventually kills off any enjoyment which these indulgences might otherwise have offered. Either that or 'lower' culture becomes a conditional pleasure, one to be enjoyed with a spirit of irony or under the temporary indulgence of 'the carnivalesque' (Bakhtin, 1968).

So it comes about that the critical discourses of legitimate culture routinely depict it as a defensive redoubt against the degradations of what the once-influential literary critic F.R. Leavis called 'Technologico-Benthamite civilization' (1930). Besides Leavis himself, prominent examples include his pupil Richard Hoggart (1957) on popular fiction and Theodor Adorno (1981) on Jazz. The

tactics are those of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Our commentators spit in the soup, so to speak, in order to demonstrate that it is unwholesome. Not infrequently this moral philosophy of cultural consumption is integral to the actual artworks themselves. In *Sweeney Agonistes* and section 3 of *The Waste Land* (for example), T.S. Eliot evokes the degradations of mass culture for a reader who is imagined as standing above that degradation (and alongside the poet, naturally). Literary culture and the discourses which celebrate its superiority are not two separate entities.

Bourdieu and Darbel (1992: 178) recognise the crucial role of critical discourses in the formation of the connoisseur, albeit with the minor qualification that they locate them wholly within the sphere of education. Though cultural education also figures in Bourdieu's earlier (1984) account of an 'aristocracy of culture' (1984: 11 ff.), it plays the relatively subordinate role of rounding-off and giving specific form to a cultural connoisseurship which has already been acquired during the formation of the *habitus* itself:

'Total, early, imperceptible learning, performed within the family from the earliest days of life and extended by a scholastic learning which presupposes and completes it ... confers the self-certainty which accompanies the certainty of possessing cultural legitimacy'. (1984: 66)

This view of the matter vastly overstates the cultural autonomy of the family and the continuity with it of subsequent education. For if the family is to be the socializing agent of legitimate culture, the significant others within it must first have assimilated its critical discourses and acquired a familiarity with its iconic works. And if education is to add any value at all for the aspirant connoisseur, it must offer some addenda to, and variations from, what has already been acquired.

Bourdieu's idea of an aristocracy of culture plays a pivotal role in his account of cultural stratification, but it is a problematic one. Besides being difficult to locate on his three-tier map of social stratification (1984: Chs. 5-7) it is an 'aristocracy' which is simultaneously required to embody the pattern of cultural consumption which defines legitimate culture *and* serve as the source of its prestige (1984: 23-4). For this to work as a non-circular account of the formation of cultural capital, the aristocracy of culture needs also to be an aristocracy of something other than culture, and it is hard to see what that might be. It cannot be monetary capital since Bourdieu believes that there is an inverse relationship between cultural and economic capital (1984: 115, 120). The only other possibility is that it is located at the dominated pole of the dominant class, which, so Bourdieu informs us, consists of cultural producers and teachers in higher education (1984: 262, 288). These, however, are not so much the consumers of legitimate culture as its

producers, respectively of its artefacts and of the critical 'placement' of these in the canon which defines legitimate culture. Whilst educators and producers might, at a stretch, be described as some sort of 'aristocracy of culture', it would be in a sense very different from Bourdieu's. One has only to visit the appropriate department of any University to encounter backgrounds very different from Bourdieu's account of painless induction into a life of cultivated Epicureanism, not to mention a vigorous repudiation of the 'ideology of natural taste' which is supposed to go with it (1984: 68). The inconvenient fact is that the authority of a critical discourse cannot simply be read off the social stratum from which it originates.

Nor is there as neat a fit between a 'distance from practical urgencies' (1984: 53-4) and the ethos of legitimate culture as Bourdieu suggests. To take one of many examples, neither the suicidal anguish of Sylvia Plath's late poetry (1965) nor its critical celebration in Al Alvarez' (1974) promotion of a 'poetry of extremity' fit easily into Bourdieu's 'systematic refusal of the human' (1984: 32) – unless, that is, legitimate culture is to consist of a forensic picking-over of other people's sufferings. The symbiosis between Plath's poetry and Alvarez' promotion of it suggests an alternative to Bourdieu's model of a legitimate culture which derives its prestige from endorsement by a quasi-hereditary cultural élite. Working in concert, cultural producers, critics, educationalists (and commercial dealers in the case of the visual arts – White and White, 1993) seek to establish the consumption of legitimate culture as a kind of expertise - something which needs to be taught or dispensed to its clientele in the form of guidance. The establishment of this expertise as a basis for promoting particular artworks to the status of legitimate culture is a subtle matter since it depends on a negotiation of what might be called the 'paradox of criticism': that the authority of critical judgments depends on the reputation of the critic, whilst critical reputations can only be established on the basis of judgments whose 'validity' can be established only by their wider acceptance and in retrospect. Bootstrapping a way out of this impasse depends on the critic's ability to create the illusion that they speak for legitimate culture itself, an illusion which ceases to be one, once it is sufficiently believed.

A note on the limits of cultural capital

Though the concept of cultural capital employed in *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984) is instructive on the ways in which consumption can become alienated, the connection between alienated consumption and commercialized taste extends to fields in which the concept of legitimate culture is simply irrelevant. A problem with *Distinction* is that it takes legitimate culture at its own valuation, as the

universal and dominant principle of stratification in the field of cultural practice. A single form of cultural capital, however, can only form a society-wide principle of stratification to the extent that it is universally recognized as a currency. Aware of this, Bourdieu (1984: 318) argues that the 'acknowledgement' of legitimate culture extends to those social strata who neither possess it nor aspire to it. The problem is that he presents virtually no evidence that such strata exist. He presents no data from the questionnaire which might have shed light on this question (ibid.: 316) whilst the unease of working class people in art galleries (Bourdieu and Darbel, 1991: 53) is scarcely evidence of a deference which is durably sedimented within the habitus and would be evident in other circumstances. What is lacking in *Distinction* (although present elsewhere in his work) is a recognition that in any complex society there are many forms of cultural capital (local currencies) and that 'legitimate culture' is just one of them - dominant in its own estimation, perhaps, but as much could be said of many others.

Disabling professionalism and the commercialization of taste: Two case studies

The case studies which follow illustrate the subtle presentations of self by means of which individuals represent themselves as authorities on matters cultural. In their very resistance to formal analysis they exemplify the importance of a 'feel for the game' which Bourdieu rightly stresses in his conceptual apparatus of field, competition and capital (Bourdieu, 1990: 66). They also illustrate the characteristic manoeuvre of disabling professionalism: the creation of a market for 'expert' advice by undermining the clients' trust in their own judgment (Illich, 1977). Autonomous judgment is replaced by that of an authoritative other, a condition which has something in common with the 'transference' of psychotherapy except that the commercialization of taste depends on its permanence. In that respect the following illustrations of taste-making in action could also be regarded as episodes in the social production of alienation.

Case 1: Mr Hearst meets Mr Duveen

Fromm's 'having' mode of existence (1979) may be at its most explicit in the collecting of art. Even where the collector is a connoisseur, it is an activity in which the pleasures of contemplation are interwoven with the urge to possess. Where, as in the vignette which follows, the collector is largely insensitive to the qualities of the work (Saarinen, 1959: 75), acquisition is at its closest to an abstract compulsion. Recognising this, Saarinen, (ibid.: xx) observes of the

millionaire American collectors, 'they were not only possessors: they were also possessed'.

In the following scene, the commodification of taste appears in the person of the art dealer. In this case it is Joseph Duveen, purveyor of renaissance masterpieces to the millionaire collectors of U.S. capitalism in its entrepreneurial phase. The compulsive collector, and hence the subject of Duveen's ministrations, is William Randolph Hearst, the ruthless newspaper tycoon said to have inspired Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*. Participant observation is by Mrs Millicent Hearst, a former chorus-person who married the forty-year-old Hearst at the age of twenty-one, bore him five children and was deserted by him sixteen years later. The account is from a biography of Duveen by the American humorist and playwright Samuel Behrman (1952: 65):

Her own apartment was 'full of stuff' – antique furniture, paintings, sculptures, tapestries. The *clou* of the collection, her husband's pride, was two Rosselino (or allegedly Rosselino) bas-reliefs of angels. Duveen moved through the clutter of antiques, tapestries and statuary with the air of a man who has plenty of thoughts but is too well-bred to voice them. Finally the increasingly despondent host stood him before the two angels. Duveen made a barely audible remark that cast doubt on their legitimacy then left. There was a sad interval after his departure. Hearst was like a college boy who, after cramming hard for an exam, has the terrible feeling that he's flunked it. He was suddenly seized by a devastating doubt about everything he had. He shouted despairingly to Mrs Hearst, 'If those angels aren't right, then nothing is right!'

By means of such exquisitely calculated facework Duveen succeeded in making himself indispensable to the American millionaire art collectors of the early 20th Century. The first move was to undermine any confidence the client might have had in their own judgment, and *inter alia* in any previous advice they might have taken. The second was to substitute faith in his own guidance. In this respect Duveen enjoyed the competitive advantage of a clandestine financial arrangement with Bernard Berenson, as a result of which Berenson, reckoned at the time to be the world's leading authority on Renaissance art, could be relied upon to corroborate Duveen's attributions (Simpson, 1986).

From the beginning, Duveen felt that his intellectual mission was twofold – to teach millionaire American collectors what the great works of art were, and to teach them that they could get those works of art only through him. (Behrman, 1952: 19)

Through this business of catering to the tastes which he had himself created, Duveen became a distinguished as well as a wealthy man. Knighted in 1919, he was made Baronet in 1927 and Baron in 1933. He died in 1939, ennobled as Lord Duveen of Millbank, the same year in which the Duveen gallery of the British

Museum was completed. In recognition of his services to art – of which the foregoing is not unrepresentative – there is also a gallery named for Duveen at the Tate Britain. Hearst meanwhile went on to fill five large mansions with his high-priced jumble.

Whilst there were genuine connoisseurs amongst the wealthy American collectors, notably the New York Lawyer, John Quinn (Fitzgerald, 1996: 112-4), cases such as Hearst's raise the question of why so many successful entrepreneurs should have chosen art as a medium of conspicuous consumption, particularly since this involved exposing themselves to the predations of the art dealer. There are a number of possible explanations. One is competitive emulation. It is not unreasonable to attribute a competitive quasi-reflex to the entrepreneurial habitus. Hearst, for example, acquired 30 newspapers in the course of his career. Nor is it unreasonable to suppose that the urge to dominate of which this speaks would extend to whatever medium of display was chosen by other tycoons. Competition between wealthy collectors was a notable feature of the American art market of the period, as is attested by tales of rival collectors seeking to outmanoeuvre one another in pursuit of particular works (Saarinen, 1959: 95, 147).

But emulation alone cannot account for a practice. There has to be a reason why there is something to emulate in the first place. Behrman's answer is that the collecting of art provided a means of laundering the entrepreneurial CV. In support of this interpretation, he cites the example of Henry Clay Frick. As chairman of the Carnegie steel empire, Frick had been responsible for a notorious lockout during which a number of his employees were shot dead by Pinkerton detectives. Thanks to his purchases from Duveen, Behrman argues (1952: 163), Frick was remembered quite differently thirty years later:

the article on Frick in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* runs to twenty-three lines. Ten are devoted to his career as an industrialist, and thirteen to his collecting of art. In these thirteen lines, he mingles freely with Titian and Vermeer, with El Greco and Goya, with Gainsborough and Velasquez. Steel strikes and Pinkerton Guards vanish and he basks in another, more felicitous aura.

This is not entirely convincing: in what regime of gullibility can Frick be said to 'mingle' with Titian et al? At the very most, he can only have hoped that the manner in which his fortune was spent would erase the memory of how it was obtained. As an alternative – or supplementary - explanation, it might be suggested that there is something of an elective affinity between the accumulation of cultural and financial capital. At first glance this seems unlikely. According to Weber (1976), the driving ethic of industrial capitalism is 'this-worldly asceticism', a secularised version of the Protestant ethic. Following

Veblen (1970), on the other hand, the collecting of art appears *prima facie* to be a blatant instance of conspicuous consumption. The incompatibility seems all the more extreme when it is recalled that Veblen introduced the idea of conspicuous consumption as a public display of conspicuous *leisure*. And whether or not one believes Weber, leisure is the last thing one would associate with the entrepreneur. The apparent incompatibility may be the product of a category mistake. Whereas conspicuous consumption is a practice, the Protestant ethic is...an ethic. To assume a priori that a practice is semiotically unambiguous is to bet against the creative powers of the casuist. John D. Rockefeller exemplifies:

He was uneasy about his enjoyment of these objects. Should a simple puritan allow himself such sybaritic indulgence? But he found his justification: The beautiful objects would 'in time probably come into public possession through their ownership by museums'. In the end beauty would be preserved for a wider audience. (Saarinen, 1959: 352)

That a man whose business practices repeatedly ran foul of the US judiciary (Piott, 1985: 113-48) could think of himself as a 'simple puritan' speaks volumes for the interpretive powers of devotional reflection. By comparison, re-thinking the consumption of art as a good work in the sight of the Lord can have taken no more than a moment. For mortal beings, in fact, any form of consumption which does not deteriorate its object can be represented as a kind of custodianship on behalf of future generations. In some cases Rockefeller's 'probably' (as in 'my collection of artworks will probably pass into public ownership') - was transformed into certainty and, with it, self-indulgence into public duty by the practice of purchasing art on behalf of a charitable trust or museum. Only the cynic would draw attention to the fact that this arrangement enabled the masterpieces in question to hang tax-deductible in the purchasers' own homes for the duration of their natural lives (Taylor and Brook, 1969: 70).

Case 2: Of camp and interior design

In the second illustration, the disabling profession is interior design as it was represented in a two home-makeover programmes broadcast in 2003: *Changing rooms* and *Design rules*. The excerpts which follow were transcribed from these programmes. In both of them, ordinarily disordered interiors volunteered by members of the public were analysed and transformed by the television design pundit, Laurence Llewellyn-Bowen, and his associates. In making the case for professional design expertise, both programmes included sequences in which the camera slowly panned over a room in its initial state of dishevelment to the accompaniment of a voice-over which drew attention to its every deficiency. As with Duveen's commentary on Hearst's art collection, the message was that of

disabling professionalism: that left to themselves the owners of the rooms were incapable of arranging for their own comfort and aesthetic satisfaction.

Llewellyn-Bowen's television image was integral to this message. That image might be described as institutional camp – 'institutional' in that the fastidious attention to personal appearance, gesture and speech characteristic of camp (Sontag, 2001), has not infrequently been adopted as a signifier of professional competence in the decorative arts. Less obvious is the connection of camp to the project of *professionalizing* interior design by inducing a sense of inadequacy in its amateur practitioners. In its verbal manifestation, camp is a vocabulary of finely calculated insult, an aspect which is absent from Sontag's otherwise illuminating discussion. It is a pseudo-insider language which flatters those who catch its nuances into collusion with its deftly-accomplished victimizations. Smith's (1974) account of the Regency fop Beau Brummell illustrates the point. Following his painstaking hours at the dressing-table, Brummell would take the air attended by a considerable audience, drawn not only by the peacock finery on display but also by the duels of delicately calculated insult in which Brummell would re-establish his ascendancy over his rivals.

So it was that the typical episode of *Changing rooms* would open with Llewellyn-Bowen exercising his wit at the expense of the room's owner. The designer speaks:

Julia has been renovating her 1900s house for the last 3 years but work has clearly ground to a halt in the master bedroom...Tell you what people. You don't need to live like this. You don't need bare plaster walls. You don't need rustic cupboards and you certainly don't need terminally geriatric curtains held back by frills that have obviously had a previous incarnation somewhere rather personal... Sometimes I walk into a room and I feel nice. But then I don't walk into rooms like this very often. This is vile. What do you want from a bedroom? Do you want stimulus? Do you want excitement? Do you want peacefulness? Do you want tranquillity and calm? You're not going to get any of that if you decorate your bedroom like this. This is the interior decorating equivalent of an overdose of bedtime cocoa...Look at the bed. Yawn! Look at the carpet. Yawn! Yawn! Yawn! I want to sleep for a thousand years in here. Luckily this room is about to receive a wake-up call. Anna Rider-Richardson is round the corner and she's feeling sassy. (*Changing Rooms* BBC 1 15/09/03 8.30)

Camp is an idiom in which this kind of fastidious disdain is an accepted norm of expression. As well as establishing the speaker as a person of aesthetic sensibility – and as such one capable of the act of design - it connects with the aspirations of design professionalism in that the amateur interior is depicted as an object of ridicule. As was the case with the deprecatory murmurs of Joseph Duveen, this is the rhetoric of a disabling profession. The taste of the room's occupant – and it is

clear that some of its features were intentional – is depicted as an embarrassment, not least to the person whose taste it is.

Two ways of looking at a room

The rhetoric of design professionalism does not work simply by discovering particular occasions for embarrassment in the undesigned interior. These perceptions are the product of a specialized way of looking at the interior: one that insists on viewing it as a composition rather than a narrative of the lives lived within it. This next sample of Llewellyn-Bowen's wit is taken from the series *Design rules*. Our resident aesthete is lounging elegantly on the bed, looking towards its foot:

That's the focal point and you need something there that's going to delight the eye [Looks at the table at the foot of the bed] Suntan oil, dirty hair brush, dusty old trinket box, somebody's ex-teddy bear. I don't think my eyes are satisfied at this moment. (*Design Rules* BBC2 4/08/03 7.30)

It is unlikely ever to have occurred to the people who lived in this room to think of the foot of the bed as defining a focal point around which the views should be composed. But Llewellyn-Bowen thinks they should. To him, the room is a composition, and at the moment it is a bad one. This holistic view of the interior is fundamental to professional interior design. As Llewellyn-Bowen puts it, 'It's about balance, It's about order. It's about conceiving and considering the room as a whole' (ibid.).

It takes an effort for the occupant of a room to look at it like this because it is a view stripped of its personal associations and detached from the particular uses to which it is put. The eye of the designer, on the other hand, is that of a stranger for whom these associations do not exist and for whom function is reduced to such generic categories as 'bedroom'. There are occasions, of course, when the occupant of a dwelling would find it appropriate to view it with an impersonal eye, notably when it is up for sale – and in a overheated property market, this may account for some of the appeal of home-makeover programmes. To live day-to-day in an environment designed with the eye of a stranger for the use of a stranger, however, is to experience – alienation.

Interior design as personality

Llewellyn-Bowen, to give him his due, was sensitive to the depersonalising pressures implicit in design professionalism. In one of the *Design Rules* programmes he introduced one Mark Jeffries, who spoke of his growing dissatisfaction with the kind of design package which attracted him to his first flat:

When I moved into my very first flat it was wonderfully minimal. Table, vase, twigs, you know, a very trendy parrot in the corner. It was all reflective of trends and not really who I was. It was about me wanting to create some kind of impression – at that time it was on girls, obviously...But now this [room] reflects a life and so much has gone on. Then I would have felt that this would be cluttered but now I just love it because everywhere I look there's something that pops out at me and I love that. (*Design rules*, BBC2 11/08/03 7.30)

Coming to terms with this narrative aspect of people's homes presents a severe problem for design professionalism. At the level of rhetoric it is solved by claims that the professional possesses the expertise to express the client's personality through the designed interior:

One of the most exciting things about my job is working out what people's personalities are like and what kind of styles they might like and I pick that up from what kind of mugs they've got. If they've got little cuddly animals on the mugs or whether they've got stripy mugs or plain mugs and I always ask them whether they chose the mugs or whether somebody gave them to them. (Brigid Calderhead. (*Design rules*, 11/08/03. BBC2 7.30)

Stripy mugs or plain mugs? It would be unkind to comment in detail on what is clearly an unguarded remark. What it has in common with more sophisticated expressions of the same approach, however, is that 'expressing a personality' is reduced to a matter of choosing a pre-packaged theme or idiom which harmonises with the client's previous choices. Given the limitations of time and budgets, this is not unreasonable in itself, but it falls a long way short of the ordinary language meaning of 'personality'. For Kron (1983: 151 ff.), to allow even this is to concede too much to the rhetoric of client self-expression. Citing a number of examples, she makes a case that the practice of interior design, particularly at the level which attracts the attention of the major style magazines, is primarily oriented towards the establishment of a professional reputation. In pursuit of this, any client interference with what she calls 'design authoritarianism' (ibid.: 251) is firmly resisted. She comments as follows on the claim of a 1920s taste magazine that conformity to good taste need not suppress individuality (ibid.: 70):

Thus, a harmonized depersonalized-looking room by architect Joseph Urban was proclaimed in *House and Garden* to be the very model of personalization. 'To be happily liveable', the magazine explained, 'a room should express the thoughts of the designer who controls the scheme and makes the room artistic and should contain articles cherished by the owner'. The cherished articles in this case were one vase, two candlesticks, and some books. Individuality was invited to the party but was hardly the guest of honour.

The individual confronted and constricted by objectified taste in the field of interior design was the subject of a polemic fantasy by the pioneer modernist

architect, Adolf Loos. *Poor little rich man* (1900, reprinted in Loos, 1982: 125-7) is the story of a wealthy man who engages an architect of the Viennese Jugendstil to transform his home into a total work of Art. At first the client is overjoyed.

Wherever he cast his glance was Art...He grasped Art when he took hold of a door handle; he sat on Art when he settled into an armchair; he buried his head in Art when, tired, he lay down on a pillow...' (ibid.: 125)

Soon, however, the client finds he must replace every casually-used item exactly in accordance with the architect's drawings if the overall effect is not to be ruined. Loos concludes:

For him, there would be no more painters, no more artists, no more craftsmen. He was precluded from all future living and striving, developing and desiring. He thought, 'this is what it means to learn to go about life with one's own corpse'. Yes indeed. He is finished. He is complete. (ibid.: 127)

The irony is that, as the Twentieth Century progressed, the modernist functionalism which Loos envisaged as a movement of liberation became instead the preferred idiom of a new design authoritarianism. In the context of this paper, a single illustration will have to suffice: Gerrit Reitveld, one of the leading architect/designers of De Stijl prevented his client from hanging a painting in the surgery which had been designed for him. Promising to 'do something' himself, Reitveld painted a large red circle on the upper part of the wall, supposedly harmonizing with the planes of grey, white and black which defined the walls, floor and ceiling (Overy, 1991: 96).

Conclusions

In opposition to the view that the contemporary self is largely created in the sphere of consumption, this paper has argued that the tastes expressed in acts of cultural consumption are as likely to be alienations from the self as expressions of it. Ranging from the critics to the producers and purveyors of cultural artefacts, the individual is confronted by a range of occupations whose existence depends on their capacity to mould taste as this is expressed in acts of consumption. The basic move in this commodification of taste is to undermine people's ability to form independent critical judgments so that a market for expertise is created in the sphere of cultural consumption – a tactic which Ivan Illich (1977) called 'disabling professionalism'. The result of this induced dependency on critical discourses is that the act of consumption loses its expressive quality and becomes instrumentalized as a presentation of self. This possibility is disallowed by the theory of 'commodified identities' (Benwell and

Stokoe, 2006: 165ff.), because its ontology collapses the distinction between the self and a presentation of self.

This contention is illustrated through the examination of two tactics of disabling professionalism as they are employed in the commercialization of taste. The first is from a biography of Lord Duveen of Millbank, the art dealer responsible above all others for the collections of Renaissance masterworks amassed by the millionaires of US capitalism in its entrepreneurial phase. The second is from two of the many home-makeover program broadcast by UK television in which the typical inconvenience and disorder of the average home is transformed according to professional standards of interior design. Considered as presentations of self, both the art collection and the remade interior exemplify alienations of consumption.

In the course of making this argument, it has been necessary to defend the concept of alienation against the charges of essentialism and economic determinism which have been levelled against it in recent decades. The first charge rests on a confusion between a *determination* (here, of alienation) which allows for other concurrent influences and a *determinism*, which does not. The second is reflected back at the anti-essentialist in the form of a question: if 'human nature' is always historically and culturally given, what (distinctively human) capacities are needed to create this historical and cultural variation? The answer proposed in this paper is 'collective intentionality' as it has been discussed by Searle (1995) and Tomassello (2008). On this basis an outline definition of alienation might be an impairment of the capacity for collective intentionality. According to this definition, an instrumentalization of cultural consumption qualifies as an alienation in that consumption takes place *as if* one shared the intentionality of a community of appreciation rather than because one actually does so.

The paper also discusses the parallels and divergences between this analysis and Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of cultural stratification. Clearly cultural consumption must be objectified if it is to function as a kind of capital. Equally clearly, the recognition of cultural capital by those who do not possess it – Bourdieu's 'acknowledgement' (1984: 318) – entails the objectification of taste as an index of inferiority. Yet Bourdieu seems to deny the possibility of alienation in his portrayal of the 'legitimate culture' (ibid.: 23 etc.) which serves as the gold-standard of cultural capital. Legitimate culture to Bourdieu is an organic (i.e. non-alienated) expression of the habitus of an 'aristocracy of culture' (ibid.: 11 etc.), a social stratum from whom it also derives its status as legitimate. On closer examination, Bourdieu's aristocracy of culture turns out to be either empirically elusive or to consist of the producers of cultural artefacts and the critical

commentaries which (seek to) establish them as components of legitimate culture. It is the overlapping categories of producer, critic, educator and (frequently) commercial intermediary which produce both legitimate culture *and* the discourses which establish it as such. In the sense that livelihoods are at stake, this means that legitimate culture is *always* the subject of commodification. Correspondingly, there is *no* social stratum whose patterns of consumption automatically qualify as legitimate culture and are thereby exempt from the possibility of alienation.

Alienated consumption matters because it subtracts from the possibilities of human expressiveness and thereby adds to the potential for mutual isolation. As the journalist Russell Lynes once put it: 'A great many people enjoy having taste, but too few of them really enjoy the things they have taste about' (Lynes, 1959: 338). The aim of this paper has been to establish that the commodification of taste extends beyond the 'mass deception' of Adorno and Horkheimer (1997). Especially vulnerable to its seductions are those who seek to differentiate themselves from the common herd. Some of them, indeed, go on to become cultural critics on their own account, and to perpetuate the belief that untutored taste is 'barbarism', as Bourdieu puts it (1984: 41).

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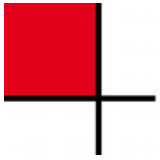
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Towards a consumerist critique of capitalism: A socialist defence of consumer culture*

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abstract

Anti-capitalism and anti-consumerism seem to be part of the same package and, for some, anti-consumerism has become the core element of anti-capitalist activism. In this paper I will argue that such an approach inadvertently allies itself with reactionary anti-capitalisms as it fails to understand the contribution of consumer culture to the proliferation of values of freedom and personal development that underpin the Marxian notion of communism. Therefore, I will suggest, there is a case for a socialist defence of consumer culture. I will further argue that the capitalist relations of production and the growing inequalities resulting from them limit the liberty which consumerism inspires, while capitalist employers seek to expropriate the creative and inter-connected individuality fostered in the sphere of consumption. Hence, I will suggest, there is a case for a consumerist critique of capitalism. Finally I will propose that consumerism also contributes to a development of the general intellect as capacity to imagine alternative futures and leaderless organization that make a realization of that critique less unlikely.

Introduction

To suggest a 'consumerist critique of capitalism' sounds quite oxymoronic – and even more so a 'socialist defence of consumer culture'. Consumerism is widely seen as the cultural expression of developed capitalism, and Marxist analyses from the 1970s onwards have tried to show how the development of an absorbent market for consumer goods was driven by the needs of accumulation and

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valorization in late capitalism (e.g. Mandel, 1975). Following Wolfgang Fritz Haug's (1986) *Critique of commodity aesthetics* one could say that, from the point of view of capital, there emerged a very real need for false needs. According to Marshall Berman's reading of Marx, we have to acknowledge the unprecedented freedom afforded by bourgeois capitalism, even though 'the freedom Marx has given with one hand he seems to be taking back with the other: everywhere he looks, everyone seems to be in chains' (Berman, 1999: 44). Yet, with Berman, I will argue that from a dialectical point of view, capitalist consumer culture may still hold the key to unlocking the potential for human development that is both built up and held back by capitalism. Referring to a vague prediction in the last pages of *Capital*, Berman notes that after the initial period of capitalism that follows a rigid rationality of accumulation, in a

'consumer' period the capitalist becomes like other men: he regards himself as a free agent, able to step back from his role as producer and accumulator, even to give it up entirely for the sake of pleasure or happiness, for the first time he sees his life as an open book, as something to be shaped according to his choice. (Berman, 1999: 51)

In this perspective, socialism is to be built on the individualistic hedonism of consumer culture, making it available in the same measure for all. The most promising approach towards consumer culture here would be what Kate Soper (2007) calls 'alternative hedonism' – developing responsible pleasure-seeking out of and beyond the hedonism of the capitalist market society – rather than 'anti-consumerism' as an outright rejection of individual pleasure-seeking understood as a capitalism-induced moral wrong. I would go so far as to charge the brand of anti-capitalism that expresses itself mainly or solely as anti-consumerism with what Marx and Engels (1848/2004) term in the *Communist manifesto* 'reactionary socialism' – an anti-capitalism that seeks salvation in the rejection of technology and consumption, and whose utopia tends to be a world of de-technologized frugal communities. It rejects the progress in human development available from a capitalist society and tries to re-establish older forms of 'authentic' community; localized solidarities that imply parochialism and paternalism, even if they are in most cases not the intended outcome.

Against this stands Marx's belief that any alternative to capitalism, desirable from a standpoint of human development, cannot turn back on the progress made in individual autonomy and liberty. He also believed that this progress is owed to the dismantling of traditional feudal, paternalistic and communal relations effected, largely, by the capitalist economy. Marx was convinced that alienation in these terms – the destruction of the highly personal ties of the pre-capitalist world – was above all liberation. Gerald Cohen (1974) speaks of an end to 'engulfment'. I will argue that the practice of consumerism has entrenched ideas

of individual liberty and self- development beyond the point Marx could imagine as possible within a capitalist society.

I will further follow Marx as he makes the case that it is not individualism that is the problem in a liberal capitalist society, but its inability to fully realize the implicit promise of universal freedom. Capitalist accumulation inevitably creates not only unknown freedoms, but also unheard-of inequalities. Still following Marx to an extent, I will argue that these inequalities are not in themselves the problem. The problem is that these inequalities translate into inequalities of power (see e.g. Buchanan, 1982: 71; Gould, 1978; Negri; 1991) and thus impact on the personal freedom that is the central value in capitalist culture, so that in the end the capitalist achievements embodied in consumer culture need to be protected from what produced them in the first place: capitalism itself.

Finally, I will argue that consumerism does not only contribute to a normative background that makes a successful critique of capitalism possible without recourse to traditional values (communal, nationalistic, religious) – it also fosters a development in the ‘general intellect’, facilitating the organization of free individuals in ways that do not imply the hierarchical, quasi-military apparatuses instrumental in the revolutions of the past (from the Jacobins to the Communists).

Anti-consumerism as desperation of the left

The initial socialist concern about consumption was not about how it is bad for you – it was how there is not enough of it. The original intent of socialist politics was to distribute the product of social production equally among those who produce it – so everybody, and not just a few, can consume what they need and if possible, even more than that. This – although not in a socialist context – is also the central point of Daniel Miller’s critique of the critique of consumerism, when he points out that:

We live in a time when most human suffering is the direct result of the lack of goods. What most of humanity desperately needs is more consumption, more pharmaceuticals, more housing, more transport, more books, more computers. (2001: 227-228)

The point here is not that there is nothing wrong with capitalism – there is quite a lot. The point is that what is wrong with capitalism is not an alleged psychological and cultural suffering caused by consumption and ‘having’, but the exploitation of people and nature in a system that constantly increases inequalities of wealth/wellbeing and power. So what I am taking issue with here

is anti-consumerism that is concerned about things like ‘happiness’, and authenticity. This does not cover *tactical* political non-consumption (e.g. politically-motivated boycotts, anarcho-cycling, veganism, etc.; see Portwood-Stacer, 2012) or other, less radical forms of political consumption (such as fair trade) that attempt to address global inequalities and ecological consequences of overproduction by using non-consumption or alternative consumption as a means to an end. Rather, it refers to a widespread sense that consumerism just isn’t good for you: the general sense of a ‘consumer malaise’ – consumerism as denting individual happiness, that supplies followers to the growing lifestyle movement of ‘voluntary simplicity’ (Alexander and Ussher, 2012) where an individualistic concern for the spiritual aspects of one’s own life takes precedence over broader political objectives (e.g. Shaw and Thompson, 2002).

But how is a concern for the material well-being of all transformed into a concern about the spread of consumerism even among the poor? Gould (2003: 343), for example, worries that the beneficiaries of fair trade may be turned into consumers. My estimate would be that it all began when revolutionary socialism started to go wrong – when it became clear that the workers were not going to make the revolution that Marx had predicted they would. In his 1916 pamphlet on imperialism, Lenin ascribed the failure of the workers of the industrialized nations to rise up, in essence, to consumerist bribery funded out of the profits of colonialist exploitation:

Out of such enormous superprofits [...] it is possible to bribe the labour leaders and the upper stratum of the labour aristocracy. [...] This stratum of worker-turned-bourgeois or the labour aristocracy, who are quite philistine in their mode of life, in the size of their earnings and in their entire outlook, is the principal prop of the Second International, and in our days, the principal social prop [...] of the bourgeoisie. (Lenin, 1916)

The discovery of the ‘affluent worker’ in the 1960s (even though the discoverers themselves rejected the idea of an embourgeoisement of the working classes, see Goldthorpe et al., 1969: 116ff.) – seemed to put a definitive end to any realistic hope for a workers’ uprising. The notion of self-emancipation, so central to historical materialism, is quickly given up and replaced by the older idea of a vanguard educating the masses (Geras, 1986: 134). Geras gives us two examples:

The first is Althusser: for whom men are nothing more than the supports/effects of their social, political and ideological relations. But if they are nothing more than this, how can they possibly destroy and transform these relations? The answer is, as it has to be, by the power of a knowledge (Theoretical Practice) brought to them from elsewhere. The second is Marcuse: the working class integrated, manipulated, indoctrinated, its revolutionary potential contained, submitting to exploitation and oppression willingly, and failing to perceive, because unable to perceive, where its real interests lie. It is no accident that Marcuse keeps returning

to the notion of 'educational dictatorship', only to reject it each time as unacceptable. (Geras, 1986: 140-141)

While, initially, educational systems and family structures competed for the part of the main 'ideological state apparatus', relatively soon a consensus emerged that an agglomeration of consumerism, culture industries and media is responsible for widespread acquiescence to capitalist injustice, nipping any subversive movement in the bud by means of cooptation (for a critique of this notion see Frank, 1998; Heath and Potter, 2005). A new society, in this view, can only be formed out of people who have been freed from the stranglehold of consumerism – and hence it can only be built on the success of an anti-consumerist movement. In short: people need to be educated to be immune to the lure of the world of commodities. Anti-capitalism-as-anti-consumerism reneges on the idea of self-emancipation. Anti-consumerism – although it hardly ever describes itself in those terms – is a vanguard movement of an enlightened few trying to wean the intoxicated masses off their addiction to consumption (e.g. Portwood-Stacer, 2012: 97).

Where even this last hope for a successful anti-consumerist pedagogy is given up, nothing but desperation ensues – as most poignantly in the dystopian vision of Jean Baudrillard (1970), an all-out culture pessimism with a self-referential system of commodity signs entangling us into an inescapable web of simulacra that deprive us of any access to something deserving the name 'reality'. For those who still have hope, however, it is no longer progress in terms of redistribution of wealth, equality of opportunities and democratization of social institutions that is the primary objective, but stemming the tide of commercialization and commoditization, which are understood as the ultimate weapons in the psychological warfare of corporate capitalism. In this view, the alternative is consumerism and commoditization on one side and community and culture on the other. As Igor Kopytoff puts it:

In the sense that commoditization homogenizes value, while the essence of culture is discrimination, excessive commoditization is anti-cultural – as indeed so many have perceived it or sensed it to be. (1986: 73)

Among the many to perceive it like this are not only critical theorists and radical leftists, but also earlier right-wing thinkers from Oswald Spengler to Carl Schmitt to Martin Heidegger (see also Bourdieu, 1991).

Anti-consumerism in the conservative revolution

Anti-consumerist sentiment is anti-bourgeois – but in an oddly bourgeois/aristocratic way. One could say it is part of the self-elevation of the

middle classes. The sneering attitude towards aspiring and/or disruptive working-class consumerism is openly acted out in the contempt for celebrity culture (e.g. Tyler and Bennett, 2010) and latent even in aspects of the fair trade discourse (Raisborough and Adams, 2009; Varul, 2011). Contemporary class hatred, as Owen Jones points out, has a strong anti-consumerist streak:

Many [...] show their distaste towards working-class people who have embraced consumerism, only to spend their money in supposedly tacky and uncivilized ways rather than with the discreet elegance of the bourgeoisie. (Jones, 2011: 8)

This is not an entirely new phenomenon. Consumerism in the working classes was a moral concern throughout the 20th century (Cross, 1993), and it was particularly articulated by the proponents of cultural pessimism and the conservative revolution which provided the intellectual background music for the rise of Fascism in the 1920s and 1930s. Their concern was mainly its allegedly ‘anti-cultural’ nature, just like Kopytoff understands it, as homogenization of values. In a commodity society where everything can be exchanged for everything else, there may be huge quantitative inequalities – but the legitimacy of qualitative inequality in terms of traditional hierarchies and religious authority crumbles away¹. Ernst Jünger’s (1932/1981: 20) condemnation of bourgeois society also takes aim at consumerism – which he claims to obscure the ‘wonderful power’ of the unity of ‘domination and service’ because it values ‘all too cheap and all too human pleasures’ too highly².

Martin Heidegger (2006: 167-178), in deliberately rustic language, paints his picture of the abhorred inauthentic flight from being in the world in terms that are clearly targeted at the consumerist aspects of big city life: idle talk, curiosity, ambiguity which lead to invidious comparison and alienation. What the conservative revolutionaries detested was not only the implication of equality and disappearance of hierarchy – it was also its inconsequential, antiheroic implications. The Catholic/Fascist political theorist Schmitt brings it to the point when he dismisses the spiritual precursors (according to Campbell, 1987) of modern consumerism, the romantics and their dreams:

All their pretensions that lay beyond that were merely possibility. [...] But the enormous possibilities that they had opposed to reality never became reality. The romantic solution to this difficulty consists in representing possibility as the

1 Of course they – and Kopytoff – have it wrong on one count: there may be a homogenization of value, but not of content and meaning – the qualitative difference of things is the very precondition for their commercial exchangeability (as Marx points out: quantitatively equal exchange value is expressed – and thus depends on – qualitatively unequal use value).

2 My translation.

higher category. In commonplace reality, the romantics could not play the role of the ego who creates the world. They preferred the state of eternal becoming and possibilities that are never consummated to the confines of concrete reality. This is because only one of the numerous possibilities is ever realized. In the moment of realization, all of the other infinite possibilities are precluded. A world is destroyed for a narrow-minded reality. (Schmitt, 1986/1919: 66)

What is rejected here is what in a liberal-democratic society, in a consumer society, is valued most highly: diversity, opportunity and possibility over fixed identities and tradition. The reactionary critique of consumerism and its precursors is one of uprooting, estrangement, alienation from folk, from soil, from destiny. Hence, as Natan Sznaider argues,

one could say that nationalism and consumerism are opposite principles. But that does not mean that increase in consumption drives out nationalism altogether. The opposite may be true: consumerism provides nationalism with something it can condemn – often as ‘Americanization’, the battle cry of modern nationalists. Project Europe as an anti-nationalistic consumer project has provoked nationalist counter-currents in all European countries. (Sznaider, 1998: 46-47; my translation)

It is around the sentiments of anti-globalization, anti-Americanism and anti-consumerism that surprising and uncanny alliances emerge between the radical left and culturally conservative forces³. The nostalgic nature of anti-consumerism and the partial convergence of left and right on it justify, I think, an attempt to understand it in terms of ‘reactionary socialism’ whose ‘last words are: corporate guilds for manufacture; patriarchal relations in agriculture’ (Marx and Engels, 1848/2004).

Liberty and alterity

The fact that consumerist alienation is a theme in reactionary discourses does not, of course, mean that it is a mere myth. Already in his *Philosophy of money*, Georg Simmel (1900/1990) makes a very strong case that the monetization and commercialization of everyday life (which culminate in consumer culture) are alienating in that they create distances, objectifications and depersonalization among the denizens of the modern city⁴. However, I suggest that it is precisely this alienated nature of consumer culture that is at the heart of capitalism’s

3 Jo Littler (2009), for example, points out that the Islamist counter-project against Coca Cola, Mecca Cola, has become something of an ‘official drink’ at anti-globalization events.

4 Both Georg Lukács and Heidegger as protagonists of the critique of reification on the Left and the Right (Honneth, 2008) owe much to this defender of commercial civilization.

human potential to go beyond itself. In a way, this point is not original – Paolo Virno contrasts the despair of Heidegger with the optimism of critical communist Walter Benjamin:

For both Heidegger and Benjamin, those who are curious are forever *distracted*. They watch, learn, try out everything, but without paying attention. [...] The judgment of the two authors diverges. For Heidegger, distraction, which is the correlate of curiosity, is the evident proof of a total uprooting and of a total unauthenticity [sic]. The distracted are those who pursue possibilities which are always different, but equal and interchangeable (opportunists in the prior meaning of the word, if you like). On the contrary, Benjamin clearly praises distraction itself, distinguishing in it the most effective means for taking in an artificial experience, technically constructed. (Virno, 2004: 93)

Virno refuses to decide between Heidegger and Benjamin here. Heidegger dismisses the realm of possibilities (following Schmitt's lead), while Benjamin embraces the pain of uprooting as the price to be paid for the opportunities of development and the freedom it yields.

If we view consumer culture as one in which individuals are assumed to make themselves through their purchases, then this is its central cultural implication: it is built on the celebration of individual choices between (commoditized) ways of being, becoming and belonging. Monetary mediation suggests the universal exchangeability of choices, the seeming reversibility of all decisions, and therefore the possibility to keep re-inventing oneself. Following pioneering consumer icons such as David Bowie and Madonna, one can complement or eradicate former selves by re-fashioning oneself with the help of new sartorial, musical, spiritual, ethical etc. stylizations. No chosen identity is ever final (and all identities are assumed to be chosen – even if they are not).

If, with Mary Douglas (1994: 136), we define cultures as standing 'on forking paths of decision trees' where having 'embarked on one path' makes it 'difficult to get back to the choice that would have led another way' – then consumer culture could be described as arrested on that forking where we decided that there will be no more forking, that there will be universal reversibility of choice (Varul, 2008). Although there is, of course, no real reversibility to be had – this is precisely what consumer culture aspires to. Not so much to undo what is done as to gain the possibility of infinite expression (an infinity whose impossibility drove the original romantics mad). This is one of the reasons why we find death so abhorrent and cannot understand the very real desire of members of heroic cultures to give their lives in battle or sacrifice, and why it is so difficult to fully understand the conclusion of Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1935/1900).

This romantic occasionalism, rooted in the structural romanticism of money (Varul, 2009), is, I suggest, a major contributing factor to the 21st-century victory of what Émile Durkheim, writing at the end of the 19th century, called the Cult of the Individual – a unifying quasi-religious consensus that the individual person is sacred, while attacks on personal freedom and dignity come to be experienced as a desecration – which indicates that the human being is both god and believer in this.

Whoever infringes on a man's life, a man's freedom, a man's honour, inspires in us a sense of horror which is, in every respect, parallel to that which a believer feels when seeing his idol desecrated. Such a morality is therefore not simply a matter of healthy discipline or wise economy of existence. It is a religion in which Man is at once believer and God. (Durkheim, 1898: 8)⁵

While sometimes portrayed as opposites – for example by Leslie Sklair (2011), who advocates a socialist globalization driven by a 'value system' of 'human rights and responsibilities' as an alternative to the 'value system' of capitalist globalization revolving 'around the culture-ideology of consumerism' – I think it can plausibly be argued, with the quasi-religious sentiment expressed by Durkheim being institutionalized in the dogma of human rights, that consumerism is its everyday version, its folk-religious practice. Consumerism as a culture contains the imperative of self-expression, self-development, i.e. incorporates as an aspiration what Marx predicted that communism would achieve. This has been expressed most enthusiastically by Berman when he says that a major

bourgeois achievement has been to liberate the human capacity and drive for development: for permanent change, for perpetual upheaval and renewal in every mode of personal and social life. ... In order for people, whatever their class, to survive in modern society, their personality must take on the fluid and open form of this society. Modern men and women must learn to yearn for change, not merely to be open to changes in their personal and social lives, but positively to demand them, actively seek them out and carry them through. They must learn not to long nostalgically for the 'fixed, fast-frozen relationships' of the real or fantasized past. (Berman, 1999: 94-95)

True, this human capacity – lived out and reproduced in the sphere of consumption – is often enough recaptured and/or co-opted into the new workplace. Subjectivity has become a productive resource and is exploited as such – from the classic case of flight attendants analysed by Hochschild (1983) to the way that 'creatives' are roped into the production of aesthetic use and exchange values (e.g. Hesmondalgh and Baker, 2010). The shift from personnel

5 My translation.

management and industrial relations to ‘human resources management’ from the 1980s onwards (e.g. Guest, 1990) constituted a widening of the definition of what constitutes labour power reflected in new appraisal systems (e.g. Townley, 1989), which as instruments of performance assessment give the lie to claims that such ‘affective’ labour is beyond measure⁶. What is measured (and thereby expropriated) just encompasses so much more these days.

Virno (2004) notes how we now sell off to employers our very ability to have a conversation as a central element of labour power, which means that we give up to them what makes us human. Thus the sphere of capitalist production is alienating in a very different sense from the sphere of consumption: the latter estranges us in that it uproots immediate relations to others and to nature, in that now money transactions mediate between us and objects, creating a distance that was not there before. But in the sphere of production, alienation means, in a very straightforward way, that we are alienated from what we produce (as we don’t own it) and we are alienated from the means of production which, of course, we don’t own either; and, if those means of production include our very ability to have a conversation, to forge emotional bonds, etc. – then even that no longer belongs to us. Here the person is alienated by and subsumed under capital. If there is a ‘communism of capital’ (as Virno claims to have found in post-Fordism), it is certainly not to be found in the sphere of production. But maybe it exists in consumer culture?

Already when consumption was still much less individualistic than it is now (and under the impression of Stalinist and Fascist celebrations of total, militarized work, as e.g. in Jünger, 1932/1981), Theodor Adorno, who, in view of his condemnation of the culture industry and his nostalgia for high culture, is often enlisted in anti-consumerist discourse – defended the sphere of consumption as the last bastion of humanity against the machine:

Only by virtue of opposition to production, as something still not totally encompassed by the social order, could human beings introduce a more humane one. If the appearance [*Schein*] of life were ever wholly abrogated, which the consumption-sphere itself defends with such bad reasons, then the overgrowth of absolute production will triumph. (Adorno, 1951/2005)

But the sphere of consumption has survived the onslaught of total production so far. One reason for this resilience against total subsumption lies in the irony of the expropriation of subjectivity in the workplace: in order to be exploited, it must

6 Of course appraisal systems cannot make objectively correct measurements of ‘labour value’ – but that has never been possible, not even in the Taylorist factory. As long as they are socially accepted one reification of work (e.g. MTM) is as good as the other (e.g. current ‘assessment centres’).

exist. Human resource managers can *select* it, they can *recruit* it, they can *reward* it – but they cannot *produce* it. Like all labour power, it is also produced and reproduced outside the labour contract. The self-expressive creative employees so in demand nowadays need to be allowed an existence beyond. There they are to construct their authenticity – which then will be expropriated as a productive resource.

Being an efficient employee demands that you are more than an employee. Having a life outside work becomes a resource when doing work, not only because of the revitalizing function of having a family, a hobby, or doing sports but because having these non-work activities develop competences and experiences that might help create organizational results. (Pedersen, 2011: 75)

As much as it craves it, production cannot bring individual subjectivity completely under its control, as such subsumption would necessarily destroy it as a resource. The sphere of consumption is inevitably unruly and conducive to individualism and liberty. This is not to imply a unidirectional causality in which individual liberty flows from consumerism. Evidently, as a political project it precedes consumer culture⁷. My claim here is not about historical derivation or automatic co-occurrence – it is that everyday practices of consumption contribute to the plausibility and self-evidence of such ideas of liberty as self-development and self-expression.

But this is not just about individuality and liberty, it is also about the possibility of a sociality that can make do without fixed identity ascriptions. It is about cosmopolitanism and alterity. Alterity – a poor translation of Simmel's '*Fremdheit*' ('strangeness', 'foreignness') – here denotes difference that comes without the need to categorize identities (Sennett, 2002). Because in cosmopolitan (consumerist) city life we are all strangers in that we are seen to be free to construct, reconstruct and reinvent our visualized identities; a consumerist city can stomach new strangers, ethnic, religious, aesthetic, sexual, etc. difference so much better than any other known form of social life. This is more than multiculturalism. We have seen multiculturalism in many forms in the past, but it always involved a strong sense of communal belonging and clear boundaries between communities (usually along ethno-religious lines). Çağlar (1997: 182), arguing from a cosmopolitan perspective against a relapse into such communalism, highlights the role of consumer culture in preventing the reification of ethnicity, religion and community:

7 There are some interesting interconnections – e.g. when Isaiah Berlin (2000) identifies romanticism as one source of the modern commitment to individual freedom and Campbell (1987) traces modern consumerism back to the same source).

A multiculturalism of consumption is a multiculturalism of the market, in which consumers are left to define for themselves who they are, away from top-down constructions by the state or by fictive 'communities'. But this implies [...] that 'culture' and 'religion' must be kept entirely out of the public sphere and that citizens should be free to negotiate their own cultural self-definitions through exchange and collective consumption. Such a divorce between community and culture would need to apply as much to the majority group as to minorities within the nation.

Any alternative to capitalism, if it is not to relapse into a frozen world in which everybody has their place, must find a functional equivalent to this alterity-facilitating function of consumer culture. Currently even the most radically left anti-consumerist movements seem to have a tendency to create island communities (e.g. Chatzidakis et al., 2012: 502) where, on the one hand, alternative forms of sociality can be lived among politically like-minded people, but where, on the other hand, a valuation of a sense of place translates into a borderline parochial hostility to mobility. Migration within a globalized world is viewed with suspicion. Subcommandante Marcos [whom Naomi Klein adopts as hero of the anti-consumerist movement, a universal avatar for he 'is simply us, we are the leader we've been looking for' (2002: 3)] speaks of the 'nightmare of migration', which 'continues to grow' (2001: 565). He is rightfully concerned about xenophobia and the marginalization of large groups of migrants, but anyone who knows a bit about migration will be troubled by the blanket notion of a 'nightmare'. More significantly, he adds the 'loss of cultural identity', a genuine conservative concern, as equally devastating as hunger and police repression. Such an attitude condemns people to their ethnic identities – while commoditization offers an exit:

Anti-modernists often bemoan that ethnic identities today are no longer 'authentic', but are rather superficial, made up of musical tropes and clothing styles and exaggerated gestures that aren't passed down from generation to generation, but chosen through the influence of the mass media. But it is precisely this commodification that allows people to choose elements from various cultural traditions and blend them into a new identity. The same process also makes it easier for people to stray from their 'original' identities - or in conventional terms, to integrate into society. Uncommodified ethnic identities are closed to outsider, and raise the costs for straying outside their walls: one either is or isn't. (Sznajder, 2000: 307)

Nobody knows that better than Subcommandante Marcos himself – hence his engagement in the literary market⁸.

Like all societies, capitalist societies are built on expectations and mutual obligations. But while traditional networks of obligations are first of all entangling webs of very specific normative expectations that can be negotiated only to a very limited extent, the capitalist economy entails an anonymization and generalization of obligation that allows us to be tied up in a very liberal way (Varul, 2010: 63). The need to earn money can be understood as generalized debt – we owe our existence to society and we need to pay off that debt somehow. According to David Graeber (2011) the ideology of indebtedness of the individual to society has a long history and is at the heart of the fact of domination. But while most other societies have clear ideas about what is owed by whom, in a liberal capitalist society we are neither told *how* to repay our debt (i.e. what to work at) nor *to whom* (i.e. who to work for – except, of course, taxes to government). We are not liberated from serfdom as such, but we are no longer tied to a particular master and our position of serfdom within society as a whole is sweetened by the reverse indebtedness of society to us – in the form of money as generalized bills of exchange. In a preview of his *Debt: The first 5000 years*, Graeber explores the moral implications that arise:

The true ethos of our individualistic society may be found in this equation: We all owe an infinite debt to humanity, nature, or the cosmos (however one prefers to frame it), but no one else can possibly tell us how to pay it. All systems of established authority – religion, morality, politics, economics, the criminal-justice system – are revealed to be fraudulent ways of calculating what cannot be calculated. Freedom, then, is the ability to decide for ourselves how to pay our debts. (Graeber, 2010)

Of course, Graeber (2011) sees any indebtedness as tied up in recurring relations of violence and violation, in which even the balanced reciprocities of the neighbourly exchanges of favours, gestures and attention (be it among the British people or the Tiv people) become a sinister symptom of repression. But in making his case, he cannot avoid emphasizing the universality of such relations of mutual indebtedness. Assuming we cannot do away with indebtedness as such (i.e. here I disagree with Graeber), the individualistic ethos looks like the best we can get. Whether such an individualistic ethos is something worth having at all is an open question. The authors of *The coming insurrection* (The Invisible Committee, 2007), for instance, start off by condemning this ethos (which they correctly identify as rooted in consumer culture), and in response conjure up a

8 Marcos has co-authored a novel with crime writer Paco Ignacio Taibo II in which he gives himself an image makeover, and features a number of revolution tourists from around the world, see Marcos and Taibo II, 2006)

world of militant communes – a trajectory denounced by Johannes Thumfart (2010) as a leftist remake of antimodernist/protofascist ideologies such as those of Carl Schmitt. If, however, the individualistic ethos is to be preserved (which, obviously, is what I am arguing for here), change needs to be pursued through associationalist (as opposed to communalist) approaches to political action in which the individual is emphatically affirmed both in means and ends. And as part of this the new possibilities of collective action available in a consumer-capitalist society need to be recognized, as does the role of consumer choice in a socialist society as proposed by Douglas Jay:

Socialists have been inclined to depreciate the value of free consumers' choice for no better reason than that it has been used as a hypocritical defence of the unregulated price scramble. Complacent defenders of laissez-faire have emphasized the great importance of allowing the individual to spend his income as he likes, and have omitted to notice that he may have no income to spend. And socialists have rightly retorted that consumers' choice is of no more use to a man who is penniless than liberty to a man who is starving. Gross inequality, in fact, turns consumers' choice into a mockery. But may not the solution be to mitigate inequality rather than to abandon consumers' choice? (Jay, 1938/1947: 255-256)

But if capitalism, as Graeber affirms, provides us with a basis for an individualistic ethos – why should we be tempted to go beyond capitalism in the first place? I will argue that, while the individualistic ethos is the moral implication of capitalism, it cannot be realized under capitalism. It is an ideology in the sense that it is an appearance created by the practice of capitalism but given the lie, as Jay highlighted, by the scandalous inequities emerging from that practice.

Inequality vs. consumerist freedom

Inequality of wealth, as it entails inequality of power, is a threat to freedom – those who don't have money to spend are excluded from the liberty of consumer culture. Liberty is tied to property – and property, by definition, means exclusion. The freedom which is a reality for the haves is an empty promise for the have-nots. But this freedom is not something to be thrown away just because for many it is nothing but an ideological appearance. Its realization for all is what Marx had in mind when contrasting the division of labour that culminates in capitalism and the division of labour in communism.

For as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can

become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic. (Marx, 1845/2000)

Marx thought about communism primarily in terms of freedom – everything else (questions of property, equality, etc.) is a means to this end: the generalization and radicalization of the freedom which under capitalism remains a privilege of private property (which is why Engels (1847/1999), in *The principles of communism* answers the question of ‘what is communism?’ with ‘communism is the doctrine of the conditions of the liberation of the proletariat’). If there is evil in alienation then, as Shlomo Avineri (1969: 116) put it, it is the fact that ‘the individual by being denied his private property is denied his existence as individual’.

If the issue is *liberty* – and if *equality* is mainly about equal freedoms – then the main issue is not immiseration and it is also not alienation. The question is whether freedoms are curtailed by unequal distribution of property rights even if there is some freedom of movement and expression for most. And property, material possession from clothing to newspapers, from Virginia Woolf’s ‘room of one’s own’ to computers, does matter for freedom of expression. Selfhood – individual or collective, egalitarian or hierarchical, eccentric, traditional, etc. – always needs to be constituted in material culture. But only in a capitalist consumer society is it to a large extent a matter of choice – hence my concern that a blind attack on consumerism will limit freedom and hence my suggestion that current consumer culture needs a functional equivalent in a socialist society, if that society is to be one of free individuals.

That negative recognition and negative freedom enshrined in consumerism are threatened by the inequalities that the capitalist relations of production, which make consumerism possible in the first place, is of course a contentious claim – neoliberal promoters of negative freedom in the tradition of Friedrich Hayek reject the notion that less money means less freedom (i.e. they disagree vehemently with the notion that equality of wealth is a precondition for equality of liberty). Huei-Chun Su (2009) brings in John Stuart Mill’s notion of liberty against this view. Although Su positions Mill against negative freedom, I think she makes it reasonably clear that Mill is far from subscribing to a notion of ‘positive freedom’ in which more wealth means more capacities and thus more freedom.

In general, more wealth implies more choices to exercise the power of satisfying desires, but it does not imply more freedoms in other aspects. If Mill believed that more wealth always leads to more freedoms, exchanging liberty for affluence

would not be an issue for him. In other words, in Mill's view, there is no proportional correlation between the amount of wealth and the degree of liberty. However, for Mill, the idea of liberty cannot be completely cut off from the issue of material conditions either. Due to their physical constitutions, human beings need a minimum level of means to survive. Therefore, they should not be considered entirely free if they face the threat of the deprivation of a minimum level of subsistence. (Su, 2009: 391)

It is easy to see why Mill is right in his rejection of a *proportional* relation between freedom and property. Not only is this due to the law of diminishing returns – property is a social thing that can also diminish freedom (a car in a traffic jam, for example). However, Su is, I think, mistaken to view Mill's allowing for some 'positive freedom' as the difference between his concept of freedom and Hayek's position:

If we think about the liberty of the weaker members in the same community, Mill's principle is actually a protection of their positive liberties. In short, Mill's principle of liberty can be interpreted from the other angle: the purpose of limiting some people's liberty is to protect everyone's liberty of life and body. (Su, 2009: 411)

On the contrary, what Mill does is to spell out the concept of negative freedom in a way that makes it easy to see why even negative freedom is curtailed under capitalism. The freedom of the less well off is a much smaller one than that of those with greater spending power. If such a negative concept of freedom implies that its only limit is the obligation of

not injuring the interests of one another; or rather certain interests, which, either by express legal provision or by tacit understanding, ought to be considered as rights (Mill, 1863/1910: 132)

then, in a society with hugely unequal property rights, the freedom of the poor is squeezed into what little space is left by the liberties taken by the rich (Varul, 2010: 59). Mill provides us with more than an argument for minimum income – and he does so by avoiding the trap of positive liberty. With positive liberty you have to define what freedom should be freedom-to – and thus introduce normativity that impacts on negative freedom (not in that it curtails the freedom of the wealthier, but in that it prescribes and proscribes what people can do with their freedom). What Mill exposes is that property (as the only quantitatively limited positive freedom of an individual) curtails the negative freedom of others in that it extends the sphere of one person at the cost of others.

Therefore there needs to be a quantitative limit. It is easy to see if we go back to the car: a car takes up space – space that others then cannot use. It is therefore reasonable to limit car use so as to protect the freedom of movement of all. But of course these look like relatively insignificant differentials in freedom when

compared to the impact that capital accumulation on a larger scale has. Although the range of products has changed since Marx wrote *Value, Price and Profit* (1865/1995), the fact remains that a small proportion of the population determines a large proportion of demand, and this in effect means that a few dictate what kind of work does and does not count as socially necessary – they have a disproportional say in the definition of social utility.

If you consider that two-thirds of the national produce are consumed by one-fifth of the population – a member of the House of Commons stated it recently to be but one-seventh of the population – you will understand what an immense proportion of the national produce must be produced in the shape of luxuries, or be exchanged for luxuries, and what an immense amount of the necessities themselves must be wasted upon flunkeys, horses, cats, and so forth, a waste we know from experience to become always much limited with the rising prices of necessities. (Marx, 1865/1995)

Inequality as constantly exacerbated through capital accumulation finds its expression in the social opportunity structure, seriously affecting what counts as valuable in terms of work (and so also in terms of education) by exerting disproportionate influence over what counts as valuable in terms of consumption. Capitalism is eating up the liberty that it produces in form of consumerism. If we want to protect the human progress culturally instituted in the sphere of consumption, we need to think about alternatives to capitalism. And this means we have to think in terms of concrete utopias by taking up the lost tradition of those Marxist as well as non-Marxist socialists who, in the first half of the 20th century, attended to the problem of how to maintain democracy and liberty beyond the end of capitalism in the organization of production *and* consumption (e.g. Cole, 1917; Korsch, 1919). But are individualized consumer citizens at all capable of inventing a new order, let alone organizing for it?

Consumerism and general intellect

As we have seen, the rationale behind the radical turn against consumption is the frustration of revolutionary hopes and the idea that consumerism is part of the apparatus of oppression (or at least appeasement) that lulls the oppressed and creates a false sense of legitimacy by instigating and superficially satisfying false needs. I want to suggest a different view – one that reinstates the original perspective of Marx: dialectical materialism. Marx does start from an acknowledgement of the stifling effect of capitalist production on any creative action. In *The german ideology*, he writes

the only connection which still links [people] with the productive forces and with their own existence – labour – has lost all semblance of self-activity and only sustains their life by stunting it. While in the earlier periods self-activity and the

production of material life were separated, in that they devolved on different persons, and while, on account of the narrowness of the individuals themselves, the production of material life was considered as a subordinate mode of self-activity, they now diverge to such an extent that altogether material life appears as the end, and what produces this material life, labour (which is now the only possible but, as we see, negative form of self-activity), as the means. (Marx, 1845/2000)

The effect of this is alienation – expressing oneself, objectifying and realizing oneself in one's product, through work, is no longer possible. But this is not only a deprivation, a cause of unhappiness. It is both a *liberation* – the separation of the person from being entirely defined by their productive role – and also an opportunity.

On the other hand, standing over against these productive forces, we have the majority of the individuals from whom these forces have been wrested away, and who, robbed thus of all real life-content, have become abstract individuals, but who are, however, only by this fact put into a position to enter into relation with one another as individuals. (Marx 1845/2000)

In working (meaninglessly) towards the end of a (meaningful) material existence, the alienated individual establishes herself as a person who can – in cooperation with other persons – take on the way things are organized and change them. While for Marx there was not much he could bring up in terms of concretizations of such potentials (the individualization afforded in principle by the alienation through waged factory work had a strict quantitative limit set by long working hours and low pay), today's material life affords quite a lot of excess individuality.

Consumer culture is geared towards the construction of individual selfhood, the free construction of subjectivity, and over the decades capitalist entrepreneurs have seen a market in that and catered profitably to such needs for self-construction. The combination of digital technology, telecommunications and software for social networking is the pinnacle of this development. 'Self-activity' as self-construction has shifted from labour to 'material life' (consumption).

In a further twist, capitalist production tries to tap into that new resource (consumer co-production, subjectivity in the workplace, as mentioned before), but crucially, the curse of accumulation and inequality, and hence domination, persists. In the workplace, subjectivity is consumed by capital as a productive force. But in order to do so, and in order to valorize commodities beyond the catering for material needs or traditional luxury, that productive force which is subjectivity must be let loose without too much control in the sphere of consumption.

The great contribution of dialectical materialism was to recognize that if there is to be fundamental change it is not enough that there is a society that is unjust and exploitative, but also that this society has produced the possibility ('productive force') to go beyond itself, both in the sense of an organizational capacity to break up the existing order and as a capacity to organize the new society. Both are best captured in the formula of 'general intellect' as put forward by Marx (1993) in his *Grundrisse*. While Marx saw it incorporated in machinery as 'objective scientific capacity', Virno (2004: 106) sees it, today, 'presented in living labor'.

The *general intellect* includes [...] formal and informal knowledge, imagination, ethical propensities, mindsets, and 'linguistic games'. In contemporary labor processes, there are thoughts and discourses which function as productive 'machines,' without having to adopt the form of a mechanical body or of an electronic valve. (Virno, 2004: 106)

According to Virno, post-Fordist industry builds heavily on the imaginative and communicative 'intellectuality of the masses' (2004: 107). This intellectuality is crucial. One important ingredient in any revolution – and the reason why there have been so few of them in the past, and also the reason why most of them were led by intellectuals – is that it takes not only the ability to organize and lead (in the sense of military leadership), but crucially, it takes *imagination*. Virno does not explain where this increase in imaginative and communicative intellectuality emerges from – but whoever knows business organizations from the inside also knows that they are not the places where the imagination is fostered. It comes from the outside – it is a cultural import. And the culture nourishing it is that of consumption. Colin Campbell celebrates the consumer's ability to gain pleasure through cognitive and emotional self-control:

In order [...] to possess that degree of emotional self-determination which permits emotions to be employed to secure pleasure, it is necessary for individuals to attain that level of self-consciousness which permits the 'willing suspension of disbelief' [Coleridge]; disbelief robs symbols of their automatic power, whilst the suspension of such an attitude restores it, but only to the extent to which one wishes that to be the case. Hence through the process of manipulating belief, and thus granting or denying symbols their power, an individual can successfully adjust the nature and intensity of his emotional experience; something which requires a skilful use of the faculty of imagination. (Campbell, 1987: 76)

In the first instance this liberation of imaginative potential, this autonomous imaginative hedonism does the job of what Haug (1986) portrays as outcome of capitalist manipulation; it creates much-needed markets to soak up the output of a senselessly overproducing capitalist industry. But Haug and other followers of Vance-Packard-style theories of mind control overestimate the extent to which

advertisers and marketeers can contain the spirits they conjure up. Berman concludes:

Where the desires and sensibilities of people in every class have become open-ended and insatiable, attuned to permanent upheaval in every sphere of life, what can possibly keep them fixed and frozen in their bourgeois roles? The more furiously bourgeois society agitates its members to grow or die, the more likely they will outgrow it itself, the more furiously they will eventually turn on it as a drag on their growth, the more implacably they will fight it in the name of the new life it has forced them to seek. (Berman, 1999: 96-97.)

Such a drive to individual development culminates in the consumerist imperative of ‘be all that you can be’, in which status competition is carried out through invidious comparisons of interesting, but meaningless, personality (Brown, 1998). In the words of Zygmunt Bauman:

In the carnivalesque game of identities, offline socializing is revealed for what it in fact is in the world of consumers: a rather cumbersome and not particularly enjoyable burden, tolerated and suffered because unavoidable, since recognition of the chosen identity needs to be achieved in long and possibly interminable effort – with all the risks of bluffs being called or imputed which face-to-face encounters necessarily entail. Cutting off that burdensome aspect of the recognition battles is, arguably, the most attractive asset of the internet masquerade and confidence game. The ‘community’ of internavts seeking substitute recognition does not require the chore of socializing and is thereby relatively free from risk, that notorious and widely feared bane of the offline battles for recognition. (Bauman, 2007: 115)

But we have seen such allegedly insulated ‘internauts’ engage in precisely what Bauman here suggests they are abandoning: struggles for recognition. Most prominently, of course, in the ‘Facebook revolutions’ throughout the Arab World (see e.g. Nigam, 2012), but also before those, Cooper and Dzara (2010) spoke of a Facebook revolution in LGTB activism in which constructions and assertions of individual identities are linked up into the construction of social problems. There is no reason why, given its inherent promises, affordances and moral contradictions, capitalism itself should not become problematized in such a way.

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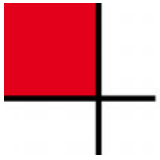
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A liquid politics? Conceptualising the politics of fair trade consumption and consumer citizenship

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abstract

A politics borne of consumption is widely contested, not only with respect to the claims it can make but also with respect to the modes of expression it allows and the sorts of practices it encourages. In this paper I conceptually frame the politics of fair trade consumption and empirically ground this account in order to allude towards and explain some of these aforementioned complexities. Conceptually, I discuss and apply Zygmunt Bauman's genealogy of liquidity in terms of organised and disorganised realms of social life (ranging from affective attachment to political activation) to the problem of fair trade. This conceptual discussion is empirically complimented within a series of interviews with ethical consumers. The paper attempts to construct a model of liquid politics which accounts for ethical consumption and consumer citizenship within the context of fair trade. This model addresses ephemeral interactions with the marketplace, cosmopolitan concerns about the distant other and individualised types of action imagined as collective. It alludes towards open forms of engagement and broader definitions of citizenship which both include and exclude traditional political categories of solid modernity. By constructing such a model, I hope to make the case for a macroscopic critique of consumption which intimately connects the structural dynamics characterising the growth of a particular politics to a variety of seemingly banal everyday practices.

Introduction: The necessity of a macroscopic consumer critique

The broad field of ethical consumption covers issues ranging from boycotting as a means of restraining corporate wrongdoings right through to 'buycotting' in pursuit of market driven social and environmental change (cf. Micheletti et al., 2004). Given such a broad spectrum, Schor (2007: 29) flags up the need for a *macroscopic* consumer critique which considers 'a new, critical paradigm that

engages the ways in which consumption has grown and radically transformed notions of individuality, community, and social relations [in the first place]'. Following such a call, this paper argues for the applicability of Zygmunt Bauman's genealogy of 'liquid' times to the capturing of the tendencies of and tensions within the politics of ethical consumption. In doing so, it attempts to contribute to the crucial understanding of political expression and participation under neo-liberalism, a connection which has been theoretically attempted, yet not empirically grounded (cf. Gill and Scharff, 2011). Fair trade is a particularly prominent case for examination, as it is one of the oldest forms of ethical consumption which has demonstrated upward market growth and has captured the trust and engagement of a variety of local, national and international agents.

The paper launches on two basic premises. Firstly, that there has been a reconfiguration of the political picture in the sense of the advocated decline of public institutions as well as trust and interest in publicly-oriented practices. One argument deriving from the fields of the social and political sciences has articulated concern about the decline of political participation and political engagement. Arguably, this has been evident in the official categorisations of public life (voting, partisanship, political behaviour) (cf. Falk, 2000). A dissimilar positioning has been keen on the exploration of cultural politics. This argument regards the quantification of political partaking through electoral ballots as a restricted point of analysis of the political mapping of the present. The second premise of this examination is, therefore, that civic life is considerably kneaded by contextual social, cultural and economic conditions (cf. Isin, 2008). The continuation of a debate on the interplay between politics and markets (Lindblom, 1977) is crucial to an understanding of contemporary civic life within this national context of 'market-driven politics' (Leys, 2001). An examination of these contexts and conditions needs to include the budding literature on the reconfiguration of the very notion of 'citizenship' pertaining to the rising significance of the civic agency of consumers (Trentmann, 2007). In this light, Bauman's macroscopic theory of liquid modernity can be employed as a constructive frame for the delineation of issues around consumer politics and consumer citizenship in the landscape of fair trade consumption in the United Kingdom.

The problematisation of a politics of fair trade consumption can be limited without a reflection on empirical data which explicitly addresses the politics of this type of consumption. The celebration or disparagement of this type of consumption can be drawn on ideological reasons such as those aiming to ameliorate development (cf. Nicholls and Opal, 2005; Lyon, 2006; Stiglitz and Charlton, 2005) to expose the limitations of this type of development (cf. Levi and Linton, 2003; Fridell *et al.*, 2004; Varul, 2008). Despite their significance in

outlining the instances where this type of consumption operates in the benefit of the fair trade movement or the free trade *modus operandi*, these studies do not provide an outlook of the citizenry approach.

A bottom-up perspective which reflects on conceptual constructs and their ideological baggage, however, can further elucidate the ordinariness of consumption and how this has come to be closely discussed with politics. Within this paper, an exploration of the characteristics of liquid politics as a politics of contradictions is based on in-depth interview data with thirty ethical consumers involved in fair trade consumption. The recruitment of these interviewees took place during ethnographic research at fair trade events, but also through snowball sampling. Ethical consumers are here defined as individuals with an acute interest in fair trade and with a degree of participation in fair trade campaigning. All of the interviewees have been anonymised. This paper ultimately contributes to an interrogation of the state of contemporary politics within the decline of quantifiable and non-quantifiable forms of participation, taking fair-trade consumption as its conceptual and empirical impetus.

Zygmunt Bauman and the political condition of liquid modernity: Politics is dead, long live consumer politics?

Bauman's (2000, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007a) immense contribution to social theory in terms of his genealogy of liquidity concerns the nature of constructions, such as the state and the means of production, as well as reconstructions of contemporary affect, such as the emotions of fear or love. By explicitly drawing on his broader work which comprises a key route in thinking about the transitions of the social world, we can work through the bias on his perspectives on consumer culture as a detriment to civic culture by building on his frames of late modernity. While Bauman's work on consumption (cf. 2007b, 2008a, 2008b) is part and parcel of his worldview, it does not compute into a constructive view of the politics of consumption. On the contrary, as Hilton (2003, 2008) has pointed out, the work of organised consumer movements has altered the equation of consumption with iniquity. This omission does not generate a negation of Bauman's claims to the caustic forces in and of consumer culture, but the attempt to a reflexive understanding of political claims in and through the marketplace.

The core articulation of Bauman's claims is that contemporary life is the consequence of liquid modernity and its conditions of precariousness, instability, fluctuation and disorientation. Bauman argues for a transition from a 'solid' to a 'liquid' state of modernity in a swift decomposition of social forms such as those

guarding choices, routines and behaviours. Similar contemporary attempts to contain an understanding of the fluid zeitgeist have also been recorded in reference to 'risk society' (Beck, 1992) and 'late modernity' (Giddens, 1990). These perspectives reverberate across one another as they describe a categorical shift in the construction and contextualisation of advanced capitalist societies in the latter half of the twentieth century. The conditions of liquid times include the separation of power from politics, the decline of community, the rise of lifestyles and the seeming freedom of choice. There is a certainty about the constant uncertainty of liquid life which is ruled by the conditions of fluidity, disposability, adaptability and constant motion.

Liquidity equals a reckless motion, whereby the freedom of mobility from the public to the private realm constitutes 'the collapse of long-term thinking, planning and acting' (Bauman, 2007a: 3). Subsequently, for Bauman, liquid modernity causes the negation of political life. This is evident in the historical (and, in his terms, praxeomorphic) evolution of the concept of citizenship. In post-war Britain, the term 'citizenship' has been long associated with the legal sets of rights and obligations that go hand in hand with belonging in a national body politic. These rights and obligations had been clearly and closely defined by the relationship of citizens with the state in a solidified manner. Thomas Humphrey Marshall (1950) drew a particular picture of citizenship, where he associated civil citizenship with the legal integrity of society, inclusive of freedom of expression, religious practice, ownership and the forging of contractual relationships. He also defined political citizenship as the rights to exercise political power, such as partaking in the democratic electoral process, and social citizenship as the rights to a standard of life and to social heritage. However, with the coming of liquid modernity, this static and normative perception of citizenship has become dated.

A further criticism of solid citizenship is that it replicates the patriarchal order that produces and exercises it. In this vein, Lister argues that traditional notions of citizenship within the boundaries of the nation exclude meaningful participation in the global civil society and alternative forms of politics; she argues that 'vocabularies of citizenship' and their meanings vary according to social, political and cultural context and reflect historical legacies' (2003: 3). As will be outlined later, this critique of citizenship can be extended to address the reproduction of the market order. Moreover, Marshall's picture does not account for the infiltration of markets in political life. It remains a traditional perspective and does not address the notion of the 'citizen' in the individualistic and atomised cosmology of liberalism; it cannot, therefore, account for the transformations which have adapted to the neoliberal spirit of recent political times. A new vernacular on citizenship has been developing. Yet, can types such

as consumer citizenship account for the transformation of political life? In other words, can we accept the shift from a solid to a liquid modernity as a shift from a static politics to a transient politics?

There are explanations ashore as to why solid political life appears contested in contemporary capitalist societies. The fall of the electoral process is a primary reason for the mourning of citizenship. In Britain, general election turnout has been steadily waning since the end of World War II. Since 1991, the percentage of political participation in the form of voting has shown a dramatic decrease, which is documented as 'the lowest since before the First World War' (Root, 2007: 72). In a Baumanian tradition, one can view these tendencies as indicative of a politically apathetic age, where non-political realms, such as consumer-driven activities, fulfil the life worlds of individuals. For instance, reality television has been regarded as detrimental to the health of civic cultures when candidates in such shows can attract more attention and facilitate more participation than political candidates or parties (cf. Lewis *et al.*, 2005). These official articulations increase Bauman's exposition of liquid modernity as diagnosed with a politically detrimental consumerist syndrome. Beyond solid interpretations of recorded political participation in the form of electoral participation, a recent audit of political engagement in the UK with a focus on MPs and Parliament demonstrates a majority of citizens being disengaged/mistrustful (24% of British adults) or detached cynics (17% of British adults) (Audit of Political Engagement, 2010). The disengaged/mistrustful grouping includes young members of the public (more than half aged under 35) with 'a lukewarm commitment to voting' (ibid.: 55), while the detached cynics were positively inclined towards elections, despite the cynicism. The loss of trust and interest in static formations of politics is evident from this cumulative percentage of 41% negatively inclined towards parliamentary procedures.

Consequently, liquidity also equals existence in trembling terrains; the lack of public space in which citizenship is made manifest is causing citizens to retreat private realms in both the institutional and individual sense; by this I mean that the private space of the marketplace becomes a platform for the exercise of politics (cf. Micheletti *et al.*, 2004) and that the private action of consumption remains an individual and often confusing identity (cf. Coleman and Blumler, 2009). So, if the politics of solid modernity are in crisis, what kind of politics are thriving in liquid modernity? In an interesting contrast with the decline of political trust, indicative are the rising levels in fair trade which boast 90% consumer trust as of 2011 (Fairtrade Foundation, 2011). The dominion of the market-based politics of fair trade is also evident in the high levels of growth between 1999-2009 when spending on ethical food and drink has increased by 27% in the last two years from £5.1 billion to £6.5 billion (Ethical Consumerism

Report, 2009). An understanding of liquid politics will have to be open to forms of civic engagement as inclusive and exclusive of the conventional. Bennett pertinently argues that 'new forms of public identity and civic life are emerging as old patterns fade away' (2000: 307). Such an idea of politics, which resonates with Bauman's liquidity, borrows notions around the decline of traditional politics, the precariousness of citizenship, individualism and the decomposition of the collective, as well as the reign of consumerism. Ephemerality, individualisation and increasing consumerism mark the key parameters of liquid politics.

Liquid individualised fair trade consumption does not deny solid collective political acts, such as voting. In fact, the majority of interviewees declared to be ardent voters. Therefore, a liquid politics does not negate a solid politics. The meshing of the two can return us to arguments such as those posed by nineteenth century European thinkers - inclusive of Marx whose famous quote from the Communist Manifesto with Engels is 'all that is solid melts into air' - who have identified a 'gaseous modernity' where, as Jay (2010: 96) argues, 'the transitional stage of liquidity was being by-passed with the rapid dissolution of the traditional world'. Conversely, the idea of a gaseous modernity holds a neutrality which is problematic, as it cannot hold on to the possibility of critique on the basis that there is no repetitive order or mode of control. Gaseous modernity is also improbably because of the concurrent existence of solid structures and practices within liquid patterns. Berman's (1988) thesis represents a breakage from this type of thinking in the sense that it attempts to construct an experiential understanding of modernity which escapes a grand narrative of humanitarianism but does not negate the lessons learnt from it theoretical backdrop. Berman's understanding of modernity resonates with Bauman's broader theorisation of liquid modernity and the latter persist as a more appropriate framework for recognising and redefining the changes in agency and structure, spaces and political orientations.

By building and gradually deconstructing a model of liquid politics for the case of ethical consumption in the case of fair trade, I bring the relevance of Bauman's modernity into light. A model of liquid politics is filled with tensional relationships between sustainability and ephemerality, political and market-based participation, consumption and commodification. One can imagine the reasons as to why Bauman has not discussed a model of liquid politics, given that he argues for an over-arching capture of liquid modernity by consumerism. In this way, politics in liquid and solid modernity become dilapidated. However, there are elements of liquid modernity which allow for the interrogation of politics beyond solid institutions and practices. By looking for these in ethical

consumption, we can identify the opportunities for an articulation of politics and the hindrances evoked by the precarity of liquid modernity.

The cultural politics of consumption: Consumer citizenship, fair trade consumption and liquid politics

A politics of solid modernity is one which emphasises traditional modes of political operation. By doing so, it escapes what recent perspectives on the politics of consumption have termed 'commodity activism' (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012). Commodity activism serves to elucidate the tendencies of cultural politics and provokes the question as to whether a model of a liquid politics can define civic engagement in actions central and peripheral to a politics of consumption. The sudden decline of primary civic habits has spurred discussions on the relevance of a more uncongealed version of citizenship. This has been phrased as 'cultural citizenship'. Stevenson (2003, 2012) regards the term as an approach to investigate questions of cultural respect and cultural democracy inclusive of cosmopolitan tendencies, ecological sensitivities and consumer practices among other variables. The link between cosmopolitan and consumer citizenship in the case of fair trade is evident according to Bauman (2007a: 247) who argues that the emergence of "consumer activism" is a symptom of the growing disenchantment with politics'. Accordingly, citizenship can refer to acting politically in a variety of ways and settings, ranging from everyday practices to full-on activism.

The proliferation of various types is evident in a range of activities such as participating in local politics or campaigning groups, attending demonstrations or protest marches, participating in boycotts or consuming ethically. The latter is relevant here as related to commodity consumption (Stevenson, 2003; Micheletti et al., 2004; Root, 2007). The long-standing marriage of politics with markets is explored as a playground of civic life. Participation in fair trade through the consumption of ethically produced and sourced goods has been gaining impetus in the United Kingdom. By elaborating on the consequences of the existence of such forms of participation through an understanding of its degrees and contexts, an articulation of liquid politics becomes possible. In terms of degrees, an 'elusive engagement' (Dahlgren, 2009: 13) is examined through the conditions of liquid modernity and through the merging of public and private spaces and action.

A reconfiguration of modalities of citizenship is at play; here I am interested in the exploration of the consequences of the conditions of liquid modernity on citizenship. There has been a blooming of different avatars of citizenship which

are not mutually exclusive; terms such as ‘ecological-citizen’, ‘consumer-citizen’, ‘cosmopolitan-citizen’, ‘intimate-citizen’ or ‘youth-citizen’ are now valid terms to describe citizenship through the practice of according acts (Isin and Nielsen, 2008). The difference between a solid model, thus, and a liquid model of citizenship is broadly to be found in the difference between commitment and choice; solid citizenship is about membership and sustenance, while liquid citizenship is about expression and choice. For instance, an ecological-citizen in this sense is one who subscribes to an environmental cause, but is also very likely to be a consumer-citizen when preferring recyclable or environmentally sustainable products. The correlations between these different forms of civic engagement are constant, and point to the unstable construction of citizenship. Within the context of liquid modernity, civic life appears as only one part of a warped whirlpool of threads, the total of which can allure citizens into a different realm, one where consumption offers the sense of a more direct and less confusing representation than parliamentary politics. The fluidity of citizenship roles has become a transient mode of participation.

Cultural citizenship, thus, necessitates the exploration of the politics of liquid modernity as an overarching context. Consumer citizenship, specifically, has been treading that thin line between commitment and choice. But this, explicitly, can be interpreted in light of a liquid politics characterised by individualisation, plasticity and consumerism. The ephemeral nature of consumer citizenship is rooted in the attempt, but unstable ability of citizens to practice ethical consumption. Ease of access to fair trade goods in the mainstream market is a definitive factor in its commercial success. Going out of one’s way in order to consume ethically is not the norm for the majority of interviewees. Two thirds of the respondents underlined ready availability as a crucial determinant to their ethical consumption rituals.

I guess I know it’s really easy to buy fair trade bananas, [be]cause in my local supermarket they’re all fair trade. (Joanna)

The [fair trade] food in the supermarket I will always choose, it’s my policy now. But if I’m buying oranges or mango or whatever... it’s easy, it’s easy for me... I’m not going to walk around with my pineapple all day long, you know? (Abigail)

It appears, then, that commitment to fair trade is enabled by the effortlessness of ethical consumption in familiar commercial spaces. This resonates with a notion of liquid politics as fleeting participation. This type of casual engagement with the ethical marketplace is facilitated by the ease of access to it. There is a difference identified between ethical choice based on proximity and ethical choice based on distance from the shop to the home.

Consumer citizenship is resolutely about transient convenience. In terms of perception, as a 'powerful site for politics' (Micheletti et al., 2004: ix), the marketplace is regarded as empowering by interviewed fair trade consumers. However, without being prompted, the majority of these who are involved in the practice of ethical consumption clarified that they perceived ethical consumption as an act of political connotations or 'politics with a small p'.

[Ethical consumption is] political with a small p, because you're making a choice to do something; to buy fair trade goods. (Harriet)

[Involvement in ethical consumption is] not political with a capital P, but I'm making a decision to try and do what I can at that point to ensure that someone else gets a fair deal and I think that is political. (Anna)

The decapitalisation of the term 'politics' speaks to the difference between solid and liquid politicisation; solid politics is politics in the parliament, while liquid politics is politics in the marketplace. Less observable was the lack of sharing this view; as less than a third of interviewees did not believe that their involvement in coffee activism is inherently political.

It feels like it is less political, it's more just about... fundamental beliefs that you have ... I don't see them as being overtly political. It's just that's what I believe in and it's not to do with politics... I don't know. (Joanna)

A conceptualisation of liquid politics is relevant; this is so because such a model can help organise the theoretical backdrop of the politics of consumption with the grounded experiences of liquid consumption. Citizens' connection with parliamentary politics cannot be confined to their exercise of the right to vote, which has been decreasing. Consumer citizenship is enacted individually, in contrast with the practices of Politics with a capital p. The body politic has, therefore, been, both in market and political arenas, influenced by the parameter of individualisation.

I suppose I would say I'm part of the modern trend of kind of personal politics, rather than party politics. So, kind of various issues I would buy into on a personal level, but I don't necessarily feel are offered as a sweep by any one party, and I think that for a lot of people has been one of the reasons that fair trade and these sort of organisations are so successful [is] because they offer you as an individual the opportunity to do something rather than signing up to an organisation and delegating your power, sort of to speak, to them. (Amanda)

In this statement, it is clear that there is a connection between a liquid politics and an individually chosen and performed type of cultural citizenship, as opposed to a solid politics which is linked to collective performances of Marshall's perception of citizenship. However, an intricate relationship exists between individuality and collectivity here. Micheletti (2003) describes such

forms of participation as 'individualized collective action'; this is applicable to types of political action subject to solitary experiences imagined as collective in the private realm of the market.

In fact, in liquid politics there is matrix of parameters in the determination of the focus and space of the enactment of citizenship acts. Such a perception of politics also allows for a global vista into a political imaginary. The very existence, history and nature of coffee activism have been infused by the increasing connection between the commodity-producing communities of the global South and the commodity-consuming individuals of the global North:

[I'm interested in] local and international [politics], but not national. I think locally I guess because I feel I have more chance making a difference in my votes and internationally, because it's so important. Nationally, I feel very ambivalent about, because I think honestly it's not going to make much difference how I vote and also that the difference that it makes isn't going to be that. (Melissa)

The effects of globalisation in terms of the relevant freedom of mobility in international travel and the ubiquitous mediation of global issues has been considered crucial to the reconfiguration of identity and citizenship. This is especially the case in terms of forming an understanding of the issues facing citizens of the world. Stevenson (2003: 5) views cosmopolitan citizenship as a form of cultural citizenship, which 'seeks an institutional and political grounding in the context of shared global problems'. Theories of cosmopolitanism attempt to explain how the intensification of links between cultures and individuals has almost removed national blinkers from citizens (Featherstone, 2002). Cosmopolitanism, then, in terms of political identity, refers to widened citizen consciousness with respect to international issues. Consumer citizenship, however, does not entail a coherent manifestation of a global citizenship (Sassatelli, 2007: 226), but it rather instils an imagined emotional attachment to the act of ethical purchase.

As transience penetrates into the borders of the national state, the impact of globalisation on the consciousness and emotional life of citizens is considered to have 'stamped' citizenship with a mark of cosmopolitanism. A re-examination of attention to local, national and international politics is essential. Coleman and Blumler (2009) discern between institutionalised forms of citizenship, such as legal-judicial citizenship and political citizenship, and a different form of 'affective citizenship'. This affective dimension of citizenship has been described as 'caring consumption' (Littler, 2009) where cosmopolitan citizenship and concerns become entwined with consumption; this, in turn, is important in understanding the various extensions of citizenship. There is a growing sense of amplified affective engagement in the sense of 'cosmopolitan empathy' (Beck,

2006) which is grounded and enacted locally at various physical spaces. From its basis, a supply and demand balance which delivers the success of the cosmopolitan fair trade narrative places the consumer at a more privileged position and the producers at an under-privileged position.

By outlining specific types of stories, fair trade activism is mostly recognised as promoting the life stories of farmers and beckoning the consumer to actively change them to the better. By narrating the consequences of opposing life circumstances, fair trade activism signifies and stresses the responsibility of (consumer) action. For example, the repertoires of the fair trade cause have been framing participation in the cause as a predominantly market-based phenomenon which is encouraged through the affective connection of consumers with producers narrated in the promotional material of the movement (cf. Lekakis, forthcoming). Similarly, but in a more individually-fulfilling manner, Soper (2004; Soper et al., 2009) describes 'alternative hedonism' which can serve to satisfy both the requirements of an ethical market as well as the self-congratulating consumer. One interviewee correspondingly suggested that fair trade consumption should not be regarded as a political outlet, but rather as a means of self-expression.

I would agree more to it actually to have its own spirit, its own motor, if it works by itself, not if it's a tool of politics. I think that's why fair trade organisations have grown very much. Because it hasn't been a tool of politics, it's actually a tool for people to express themselves. (Gabriella)

This narrative of self-expression coincides with the narrative of affective connection through the marketplace. Cosmopolitan consumer citizenship attempts to make claims to global rights and responsibilities. In the case of the fair trade movement, consumers in the global North make political claims about the lives of the producers in the global South by articulating through their ethical purchases an intended contribution to the conditions which frame the producers' life conditions (cf. Huey, 2005; Nicholls and Opal, 2005). Fair trade is also a case where, as aforementioned, the 'cosmopolitan-citizen' meets the 'consumer-citizen'. The infiltration of consumer culture in manifestations of citizenship can therefore not be denied.

Indeed, the mechanism which facilitates the manifestation of consumer citizenship is the marketplace. The assumption is that the purchase of ethically produced and traded goods either makes the consumer comply with certain moral standards and/or makes claims to the mainstream market for the integration of morality. But this new form of consumption does not only have moral repercussions. A consumer-infiltrated citizenship and concerns 'globalizing responsibility' (cf. Barnett et al., 2011). In the particular politics of

fair trade, this type of citizenship is more apparent than others. Through its diverse manifestations in raising awareness, advocating, and protesting for solidarity in international coffee trade, coffee activism is one of the most interesting examples of how activism is now centred around a single-issue which is global and at the same time local, political but also commercial. However, this raises concerns in relation to the banality of cosmopolitan consumer citizenship, as elaborated in the next section. Therefore, a picture of liquid politics can be drawn in light of the political detriment of solid modernity and the market high life of liquid modernity.

Liquid politics: Can the model be conceptualised?

The extrapolation of an argument on the existence of a politics of liquid modernity offers a substantive way of conceptualising the politics of consumption in terms of ephemeral participation, cosmopolitan concerns and a particular type of individualised action. In a time of decreased political interest and increased consumer participation, this is a picture which validates Bauman's framing of the aftermath of the growth of consumer society at the expense of political society. Bauman does not discuss liquid politics as he views it as captured and capitalised by liquid modernity. However, while his genealogy of liquidity negates traditional politics, liquid politics can be associated with fleeting interactions, cosmopolitan concerns and individualised types of action.

A liquid politics is prone to open forms of engagement and broader definitions of citizenship both inclusive and exclusive of the traditional politics of solid modernity; it, therefore, captures legal-judicial and political, but also affective formats of participation. The driver for the articulation of this kind of politics stems from the evident decline of traditional modalities of politics, the precariousness of institutions and individuals within the matrix of international relations and development, the individualisation of existence both in a neoliberal (self-managerial) perspective, but also from an institutional one (in terms of the decline of publicly-oriented institutions), the consequent decomposition of the collective and the reign of consumerism in advanced capitalist societies. Later I explore how the meshing of political and economic behaviour is (undemocratically) perceived as matching rather than clashing. The cultural politics of liquid modernity belong to an ephemeral culture, an individualist society, a consumerist politics and a commodifying system.

The ephemeral element which underlines the liquid politics of consumption stems from a culture of '*disengagement, discontinuity and forgetting*' [italics in original] (Bauman, 2005: 62). This is palpable in the fragmentation of cultural

citizenship facades and lack of sustenance in the performance of non-committing acts. Shopping is an act which is subject to ritual, but also to the lack of commitment. While fair trade might be the primary option in the ethical choices of consumers in the UK, there is no guarantee that the ritual of fair trade consumption will not wane if the structural facilitation of the fair trade market alters its ways. For instance, the mainstreaming of the fair trade market was accelerated by the stronger involvement of corporate agents from manufacturers to distributors and the promotional culture of fair trade has been heavily influenced by these (cf. Lekakis, 2012). The placing of ethical products on supermarket shelves has enlarged the market capacity of fair trade, but also enveloped ethics in a jungle of other products. It would appear that while availability of fair trade products underscores the consumer habits of ethical consumers, it does not necessarily translate into a solid, ritualised activity.

Another determinant of liquid politics is that it exists within an individualistic society where *'individuality is a task set for its members by the society of individuals – set as an individual task to be individually performed, by individuals using individual preferences'* [italics in original] (Bauman, 2005: 18). A critique of the politics of fair trade requires an interrogation of the notion of individualisation. As a movement which prioritises individual forms of participation (namely consumption) fair trade can be susceptible to a neoliberal mentality. Additionally, while it aims to contest the market fundamentalism of a system of global trade, it softens the antagonism between free trade and fair trade by attempting to create a pedagogical relationship where the second teaches the first (Lamb, 2009) while it underscores the political agency of the consumer rather than emphasising the consumer agency of the citizen; in this way, there is a transference of priority from the citizen to the consumer.

By mobilising individualities through the market, there is little guarantee of the prioritisation of moral, social and environmental standards over profit. Increasingly, more citizens seek opportunities and structures to express themselves politically. Solid formats of political engagement, while present, can be opted out of; as Katherine pointed out,

I could go and do lots of rallies in parliament and constantly write to my MP and stuff, but it's not something I choose to do really.

One of the arenas where citizens choose to do so is the market, where consumer capitalism appears to allow and enable them to make political claims. Dispersion of politics is typical of the conditions of liquid modernity, where project-type thinking, such as setting the task to purchase fair trade at the next shopping trip, penetrates all forms of social life. The project-type ethical thinking that matches

the shopping list mentality of the consumer corresponds directly to the commodification of fair trade politics (cf. Lekakis, 2012).

The politics of fair trade consumption is, above all, a consumerist politics belonging to a commodifying system avid for market performance and prominence, in the sense that it creates a market as well as serves it. Bauman (2005: 89) writes:

whatever the market touches it turns into a consumer commodity; including the things that try to escape its grip, and even the ways and means deployed in their escape attempts.

I take this as one definition of banality pertaining to the politics of consumption. But while Bauman expresses this in the pejorative sense, I also consider superficiality to be a parameter of banality in the sense of ephemeral, on-the-surface connection in light of liquid modernity. Billig (1995) speaks of 'banal nationalism' as manifested in symbolic repertoires ranging from superficial to meaningful expressions of affective citizenship; his invaluable exploration of banal nationalism embraces the notion that nationalism is rendered banal in the sense that it is invisible but omnipresent and latent but potent. There is relevance here between the banality permeating national belonging and cosmopolitan belonging with regards to the politics of fair trade consumption.

Beck (2002, 2004) discusses the range of 'banal cosmopolitanism', which concerns the final parameter of liquid politics; through the assumption of connection between producers in the global South and consumers in the global North fair trade consumption is inescapably interconnected and interrelated with the political project of neoliberalism. Beck (2004: 151) posits that banal cosmopolitanism

is closely bound up with all kinds of consumption ... the huge variety of meals, food, restaurants and menus routinely present in nearly every city anywhere in the world [and] also penetrates other spheres of everyday culture – music, for example.

I would argue that there is a specific type of banality attached to fair trade consumption and the political claims which it connotes. Rhetorically, in the repertoires of fair trade activism there has been a framing of the gap between the distant producing others and the home-based consuming 'us' (Lekakis, forthcoming). This supposition creates a safety and comfort in the enjoyment of fair trade consumption, but also a silencing in the questioning of its relationship with free trade.

Another definition of banality in the politics of consumption concerns the mode of address of other people. One of the many discerning factors between fair trade

and other types of ethical consumption (i.e. organic, vegetarian, free range, sustainable fish) is that fair trade corresponds to a movement vis-à-vis neoliberalism, while the other types do not do so, explicitly at least. Fair trade is the only type which directly addresses the very modality of the global trade cycle; in doing so it encompasses a variety of social and environmental justice-related parameters which concern the production and distribution of fairly-traded products. Fair trade products are not products which are intended for the benefit of the consumer alone or produced for purposes of environmental sustainability; fair trade products include a consideration of a community of *Others*, i.e. distant strangers who are repeatedly exoticised (Varul, 2008) but who are reported by campaigners to be present in the imagination of ethical consumers. An added level of banality, therefore, is evident in the connection between the producing others and the consuming us; this connection is transient, skin-deep and enabled by consumerism. Fair trade consumption then resounds with banal cosmopolitanism in the sense that ethical consumer choices are presented as opportunities to connect through the ethical marketplace.

Furthermore, confusion exists with regards to the relationship between free and fair trade, making the political goal of fair trade an elusive thought. For interviewees the question of this relation is a frustrating one:

I'm not an economic expert for one and I don't know, ... if we leap from a capitalist market to a completely fair trade market, I don't know if that'll work. ... I do understand why capitalism exists ... I also know that we're never going to have 100% fair trade market and, as far as I see it, however much I can increase what we do have is a good thing [be]cause I know we're never ever going to abolish free trade.... I mean completely free trade is not fair basically, it's not fair. (Melissa)

Banality can also be found in the idea of marketplace democracy where the marketplace accounts for the space where citizens flee to cast their economic vote after disillusionment with the eroded political space (cf. Dickinson and Carsky, 2005; Cherrier, 2006). This is the premise of interrogation of liquid politics as it provides a hasty answer to the question of where people can behave politically when solid politics has been wasted. However, a better question to escape from the duality of arguments supporting the absolute harmony between markets and political behaviour or the opposing view of the capitalisation of politics by markets would be how people can behave politically when solid politics has been wasted. Voting in the space of the market does not have the same connotations or implications as it has in the realm of politics. So, a model of liquid politics can further allow us to build a critique of consumer politics that is both productive in terms of understanding reconfigurations of political life and sober in terms of understanding its limitations.

Liquid consumer culture and critical doubt

With waning rates of officially recorded and recognised political participation, a theorisation of unofficial, meddled and unanchored political participation is useful in accounting for tendencies as well as tensions in the grounding of politics. In terms of a strict political vernacular which resonates with solid manifestations of political participation, there is a decline of connection with the processes which formulate the conduct of everyday life. However, alternative vocabularies of civic life can account for the displacement of politics. Therefore, the normative conceptualisations of solid modernity cannot account for the transformations of liquid modernity. In a book that preceded his theorisation of liquid modernity, *In search of politics*, Bauman (1999: 108) wrote that:

doubt is the most precious gift thinkers may offer to the people who desperately try to find their way while smarting in the double bind of the inert burden of the TINA¹ strategy at the top and the hazard of the privatized life-politics at the bottom.

Critical doubt does not equal a negation of the strategies of citizens to political expression and action, despite the many limitations of ethical consumerism as a vehicle for political change. It is precisely this relationship between political expression and political change that characterises the restrained politics of fair trade. The tradition of critical thought and theory associated with the Frankfurt School only goes so far in mapping out the roadmaps for the politics of consumption in the case of fair trade. This tradition, akin to Bauman, has negated the very act of consumption as infused with the poisonous qualities of hedonism, selfishness and flaccid reactions to consumer culture. The cynicism which has addressed the fair trade movement does not come from a critical perspective on the detriment of the political core of the cause, but has predominantly arisen from neoliberal conservative agents who have denigrated the movement's developmental work (cf. Mohan, 2010). But while fair trade is not a panacea to free trade, it cannot be rejected outright because of its employment of the consumer as a categorical agent of change. It has awakened the sense of responsibility in the average consumer (as evident through surveys in the UK) and hosted the opportunity for small change and political expression which both indifferent and interested citizens have embraced.

At the same time, the phenomenon of ethical consumption allows citizens to believe they are engaging in a political act through which they voice their preference towards a fair model of trade, but not necessarily their opposition to the current model of free trade. A question addressing the relationship between fair trade and free trade was confusing to interviewees. There is reluctance

¹ There is No Alternative.

around fair trade vis-à-vis free trade – citizens are not economic experts capable of meaningfully assessing the two models, but they understand a simple narrative or ‘normative conclusion’ (Polletta, 2006) which suggests, for instance, that the more fair trade coffee you buy, the more coffee farmers benefit. But while they were confused about the real economic relationships and impact of fair trade, at the same time they were assured about the right to expression granted by fair trade consumption:

I’d say I’m more kind of active as a consumer, that’s how I show, demonstrate, my commitment to fair trade... Since ten to fifteen years or something I’ve always bought fair trade when it was available and always tried to buy sugar, coffee, tea all that kind of stuff. And, also, I always wondered why it was for such a long time such a narrow area and why should it only be coffee and tea that’s fair trade? Bananas should be [fair trade], every vegetable, every fruit, every flower. (Emily)

The issues attached to a politics of fair trade consumption relate to the perseverance of market logic and the non-perseverance of combined civic and consumer agency. A macroscopic critique which would deal with consumer politics needs to delve in the exploration of the structural dynamics characterising the growth of that particular politics in relation to the everyday practices at the bottom of a very unstable pyramid. The rise of trust in consumers through commercial symbols exists at a battleground for consumer attention where stronger more established agents usurp nascent agents and where consumer behaviour is adaptable to individual needs (cf. Gereffi, 1994; Raynolds, 2009; Lekakis, forthcoming). This is evident in the success of the Fairtrade label which is the official certificate and brand of the Fairtrade Foundation (and organised movement) which overshadows products which do not carry this specific label. The arguments for the existence of one unifying label naturally adhere to standards of product reliability, however by doing so are increasing a market-based thinking to the process of fair trade participation. This propels fair trade consumption closer to the engine of neoliberalism. Most importantly, an exploration of consumer critique with a focus on the politics of consumption must include the understanding that liquid modernity is a continuation of solid modernity and as such contains elements, agents, strategies and audiences from that tradition which have been forged in the rituals and practices of a continuous, committed and mindful past.

The idea that the market is a mechanism which provides citizens with choices and outlets for expression through consumption is directly linked to the political repertoires of neoliberalism (Schmookler, 1993). In this sense, fair trade consumption does not present citizens with a clearly defined political goal. Ethical consumerism is more frequently than not viewed as a legitimate and politically charged arena, where their ‘economic votes’ can be cast. The

celebration of ethical consumerism as a politically valid act should not be swiftly related to economic voting. When it does, it belongs to the repertoires of economism and 'banal cosmopolitanism' (Beck, 2002). Marketplace democracy exists within the legitimization of a neoliberal replacing of a political space with a commercial space. Neoliberalism has been pushing towards a shift of the political process from political structures to market structures, as the state grows weaker and the market stronger. This is particularly evident in the case of fair trade consumption where the levels of trust and behaviour have moved from the political process of engaging with political parties or organisations to engaging in supermarket consumption. Despite the interviewees' commitment to voting, the larger picture of UK citizens disproves the sustenance of trust and engagement with political institutions. Therefore, although it is tentative, in comparison to gaseous modernity which renders the possibility of commitment impossible, liquid modernity is a more viable avenue for understanding the changes in the social fabric.

Furthermore, cultural (consumer and cosmopolitan) citizenship in this case is stamped by individualisation, flexibility and politically debilitating consumerism. Individualisation in consumer citizenship and beyond exists as the quiet reconstruction of citizens as 'self-interested disparate individuals' (Root, 2007: 36). Individual acts of consumer citizenship are ephemeral and conditional as they are imagined as collective and emotionally coupled. In this sense, the breakage of the solid bonds between institutions and citizens, as well as those between citizens as a collective body politic fuels the fluidity of liquid politics. The potential solid politics of fair trade consumption need to be anchored in a political agenda which is clearly connected with further action beyond consumption and a sustained effort to wash against the waves of liquid politics as fragmented, individualised and divorced from promise. A constructive macroscopic critique can elucidate the opportunities for progressive politics which can stem from the employment of the category of the consumer, but are translated rhetorically to clear targets.

A model of liquid politics fits the politics of fair trade consumption in so far as it can explain the precariousness which characterises political engagement and the excitement that characterises successful ethical consumption formats. Perhaps a choice in employing Bauman's grammar in questioning this particular politics of consumption poses a bias in terms of the political empowerment that a large number of people in the United Kingdom are demonstrating, as Bauman senses a coercion of market mentality and orientation. However, at the same time, this model appears particularly fitting in interpreting consumer participation where there is political insecurity and lack of cohesion in political articulations, multi-modal citizenship roles and cosmopolitan orientations in the sense of everyday

consumption. The real structural questions that frame liquid politics concern the degrees of solid and political commitment (i.e. the ability to express and support a cause through the marketplace and beyond) and the resistance to market logic which dictates the rules of the game (i.e. buy this and you can change the world). A consumer politics in liquid modernity can enable insights into situations where consumption might be one of the few opportunities for political engagement with a cause, but also disable the articulation of that political engagement by providing the assumption that this would be enough.

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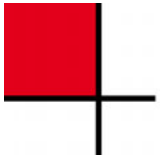
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From politicisation to redemption through consumption: The environmental crisis and the generation of guilt in the responsible consumer as constructed by the business media

Isleide Fontenelle

abstract

This paper follows a line of studies that have questioned the notion of politicisation through consumption, especially regarding the way in which consumer responsibility has been constructed within the organisational and marketing contexts. This article analyses how the environmentally responsible consumer has been 'produced' by the business media, considering it to be a mirror to the corporate world that reflects and re-signifies corporate practices and dominant social discourses. This research involves the analysis of two magazines during the period from 1996 to 2007, Britain's *The Economist* and Brazil's *Exame*. The method employed for this research was discourse theory, which was founded by Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe and extended by contemporary authors based on Lacanian psychoanalysis and its concept of the Real. An empirical analysis, supported by an extensive bibliographic review of the relationships that exist between sovereignty, responsibility and guilt within the contemporary context of the enterprise culture and new environmental paradigm, allows us to offer some reflections: first, whether and to what extent the media's construction of the responsible consumer has combined the liberal discourse of the sovereignty and the moral sentiments of the consumer with the notion of culpability that is a part of the environmental crisis discourse; second, whether the combination of these elements has resulted in a discourse that produces guilt and redemption as merchandise.

Introduction

In the midst of the contemporary discursive production on the environmental crisis, the theme of consumption is becoming increasingly prominent in light of

the way in which the act of consuming has become associated with issues related to mitigating damage caused to the environment. It was not always so; the relationship between consumption and environmental degradation was already addressed by some of the authors and environmentalists of the ecological movement that started in the 1960s. However, at that time, this concept was largely ignored by the hegemonic Environmental Movement,

which was produced by institutionalised and socially legitimate means comprising the state sectors of central countries, intergovernmental institutions and [more recently] companies and major NGOs that circulated in this environment. (Portilho, 2005: 16)

The concept was only considered by the previously mentioned movement in the context of the discursive production of the environmental crisis of the 1990s. As a function of the dislocation of the focus from production to consumption (Eden, 1993; Stern, 1997; Spaargaren and Vliet, 1998; Goodman and Goodman, 2001; Urry, 2010; Smart, 2010), the concept started being publicly debated, requiring companies and consumers to adopt a position. This discursive dislocation also allowed what was called ecological, green, sustainable, or environmentally responsible consumption to become integrated into the politicisation of consumption (Blee, 1985; Buechler, 1995). Generally, consumption as a *political act* refers to a purchasing (or non-purchasing) process, in which concerns about the impact that the consumption process could have on the economic, social or cultural environment are implicit. This is confined to the fact that the consumer thinks and is concerned with the effects that his or her choice of purchase might have on others and on the world: for example, the treatment of workers involved in producing a particular product or its environmental impact.

Considered to be a political player, the responsible consumer can therefore be involved with different causes: defence of the environment, fair trade, the non-exploitation of human labour and the non-exploitation of the body in terms health and quality of life. In the proposals of Lang and Gabriel (2005), these critical manifestations of consumption can only be considered political when they are condensed into a consumer movement; what the authors call *consumer activism*. In outlining a brief history of consumer activism, these authors show how such movements go back to the 19th century when certain products were already being boycotted and cooperatives were being established. These movements have their own histories and persist today through various British and international institutions.

The debate about the possible reach of consumer movements has been strong in academic circles, whether from the perspective of citizenship (Trentmann, 2007; Soper, 2007; Jubas, 2007; Clarke, 2007; Schild, 2007) or of New Social

Movements (Buechler, 1995; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004). Authors working on this subject seek to define this type of consumption as *ethical*, *activist* or *citizen*, always emphasising the importance of a movement that positions itself politically and questions the values and excesses of the consumer society. At times, such movements have the connotation of being consumer movements, while at others, of being anti-consumption movements (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Harrison et al., 2005; Soper, 2007; Jubas, 2007; Clarke, 2007; Schild, 2007; Trentmann, 2007; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007; Varman and Belk, 2009).

However, it is the individual consumer who has gained prominence in the business discourse about the relationship between consumption and the environment within the context of seeking to construct broader corporate sustainability. From this perspective, the most commonly used terms referring to consumers are *conscious*, *responsible*, *ecological*, *sustainable* or *green*, and the focus is almost always on discussing the role of individuals in their consumption decisions (Holt, 2002; Caruana and Crane, 2008; Connolly and Prothero, 2008; Carducci, 2008; Szmigin et al., 2009). In this context, the discourse in defence of the environment is linked to corporate social responsibility strategies, with the aim of reaching consumers who are willing to make choices that recognise and attribute value to such business strategies. Individual consumers are hailed as sovereign and empowered, capable of making decisions and taking responsibility for their actions (Davies and Elliott, 2006).

Research, however, is already beginning to question the true reach of this individually responsible consumer. In a study by Caruana and Crane (2008), who sought to understand the role of corporations in constructing the nature, meaning and implications of *consumer responsibility*, the importance of corporations in shaping this consumer, who is necessary to the new relationships between consumption and the environment, is evident. The authors, however, question this role, suggesting that the *responsible consumer* category 'emerges from a highly institutionalised, technical marketing discourse predisposed to differentiate, position and enable consumer choice' (ibid.: 1496). Connolly and Prothero's study of *green consumers* concludes that

the feeling of individual power is accompanied by the added uncertainty of knowing what to do. So in a sense, individuals are left with a sense of *I don't know what is the right thing to do*. It is unsurprising, then, that alongside these attempts at making the right decisions there are also feelings of guilt, ambivalence, compromise and inconsistencies in addressing environmental issues at the personal level. (2009: 133, italics in original)

Elsewhere, in a study based on 33 structured interviews focused on understanding 'the environment and political action in Denmark', in which 'one of the central themes of the study was the ways in which environmentalist represented consumer practices discursively', Jorgensen and Phillips claim to confirm 'Bauman's pessimistic view that the privatisation of human problems and of the responsibility for their resolution mitigates against political action which challenges existing forms of social organisation' (2002: 155-169).

This paper follows this tradition of studies that reflect on the limits of politicisation through consumption, as well as on the role that corporations can play in building environmentally responsible consumers. With this in mind, a survey was conducted of two magazines, the British magazine *The Economist* and the Brazilian magazine *Exame*, in order to understand how environmentally responsible consumers have been created. The period from 1996 to 2007 was analysed, ranging from the year that preceded the signing of the Kyoto Protocol, when the role of consumption in the environmental crisis had already become part of the public agenda, and the year in which the research was finalised. Bearing in mind the climate change issue, which put the relationship between consumption and the environment on the public agenda, we start from the assumption that the business media could be heavily influential in terms of focusing the debate on the construction of the discourse that the consumer is responsible for the environment, which has served the interests of the marketing world. The media (printed and electronic newspapers, films, TV programmes, blogs, documentaries, specialist journals, etc.) have generally been considered important players in constructing the concept (Yearley, 1991; Phillips, 2000; Jorgensen and Phillips, 2009; Corbucci, 2011).

The business media are an integral part of this broader media context and are understood as mirroring the corporate world. In this sense, they reflect certain organisational and marketing practices that are already in operation. Within the context of the production of the environmentally responsible consumer, as already shown by Caruana and Crane (2008), it is obvious that the latter has been constructed in a permanent dialogue with actions of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Thus, the authors state that consumer responsibility

involves an essentially contested discourse about what it means to be a 'responsible' consumer, how (or which) responsibilities can or should be mobilised through market transactions, and what the implications might be of doing so. Focusing precisely on the central role that corporations play in the construction of consumer behaviour and the market, the authors state that 'they

have largely dominated the debate around social responsibility more generally' (ibid.: 1496).

In the case of the Brazilian magazine we researched (*Exame*), academic studies have already demonstrated the importance of this publication in disclosing certain practices of the Brazilian and international corporate worlds. The magazine itself states in its editorial profile that it is the 'Brazilian leader in both publicity and circulation among business magazines [and that] it brings its qualified readers ... profound analyses of the main happenings in the world of business'¹. This is not, however, a mere reflection. In being registered in this media scenario, corporate practices are re-signified, and the media discourse itself starts exercising an influence over what corporate practices *should be*. Paraphrasing Boltanski and Chiapello (2009), who analysed the management and administration literature in order to understand the spread of the new spirit of capitalism, it is also possible to state that because the business media is public literature, destined to obtain adhesion to the exposed precepts and engagement of a great number of players, it must be backed by normative views that are linked to a more general orientation towards the common good, the purpose of which is to say what should be. Furthermore, because the *The Economist*, was researched, the challenge in articulating the '*should be*' is even greater because it cannot be considered to be *just* a business magazine. In its editorial profile, *The Economist* states that it is an international news weekly and a business publication that is read by more world political and business leaders than any other². Given this publication's importance for registering the *enterprise culture* in the neo-liberal years that started with the administration of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, it was not chosen by chance. As we shall see, the *enterprise culture* is central to the analysis of the production of the responsible consumer.

By analysing these two magazines, we can reflect on the extent to which the questioning of the responsible consumer initiates the production of guilt in order to allow the market to provide redemption in the form of merchandise. The reports from the two researched magazines that referred to the question of guilt and redemption through consumption led us to this thought. Based on the reports, we searched the existing literature for how guilt emerges amid the dislocation caused by new environmental paradigms (Stravakakis, 2000), which produced an eschatological view of the end of the human species because of the hyper-consumerism of modern societies. When guilt is re-signified within the media and marketing context, the idea of the end persists but is shrouded by the

1 See <http://publicidade.abril.com.br/marcas/exame/revista/informacoes-gerais>.

2 See http://www.economistgroup.com/what_we_do/our_brands/the_economist_brand_family/the_economist.html.

logic that it is possible to continue consuming provided it is via environmentally responsible companies. Carried out in an individual and responsible way by consumers, the choice of these particular companies guarantees that the consumption of individuals does not lead to the end for everyone.

To make this analysis we begin by presenting some of the theoretical and methodological fundamentals underpinning the research. Then, we present the empirical research and, based on the presented data, discuss how the ideas of responsibility, guilt and redemption appear in the construction of the environmentally responsible consumer. Next, the discourse of the two magazines is analysed in light of 1) the discourse of accountability, which is based on the liberal project and was provided with new dimensions by the neoliberal ideas and practices that were expressed throughout the 1990s and gave rise to an enterprise culture and the notion of the consumer as a moral agent; and 2) the discourse of blaming the consumer, which is found in the environmental crisis discourse and also gained strength during the same decade. Our argument is that the analysed business media have rearticulated these two discourses to a demonstrable degree. The motivation that underlies the analysis, bearing in mind the objective of this special issue, is to indicate the challenges that such discursive construction poses for the politicisation of the consumer.

Theoretical and methodological fundamentals

The main theoretical and methodological premise on which this article is based is that discourses are contingent constructions of reality. This premise is in line with a Lacanian psychoanalytical perspective, especially regarding the conception of the Real and the inconsistency of the Other (Lacan, 2008). The Other is the symbolic field, a space in which discourses seek to be constituted and become firmly established as unquestionable truths. The Real is the excess that cannot be symbolised and that, therefore, disturbs the symbolic field to the extent that it reveals that there is always incompleteness and inconsistency in the Other. The Real, says Lacan, lacks for nothing (Lacan, 2005). According to philosopher Slavoj Žižek, one of the most prominent contemporary interpreters of the Lacanian reading of the Real, Lacan considered psychoanalysis to be ‘a method for interpreting either oral (the patient’s words) or written texts’ (Žižek, 2010:12). However, Lacan did not really develop a method that can serve as our guide in analysing contemporary social discourses. In our view, this undertaking was carried out by the authors of discourse theory, both those who were involved with its foundation (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001) and those who extended it, particularly by especially emphasising the Lacanian theory (Glynos, 2010; Stravakakis, 1997, 2000).

Discourse theory is not simply a method of analysing data, nor can it be separated from its theoretical and methodological foundations. It is mainly characterised by being a *problem-driven* approach and not a *method-driven approach* that is more motivated 'by the techniques of data-gathering and analysis than by a concern with the empirical phenomena under investigation' (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 167). From the *problem-driven approach* perspective, 'a range of disparate empirical phenomena have to be constituted as a problem, and the problem has to be located at the appropriate level of abstraction and complexity' (ibid.). We have taken discourse theory as the framework guiding this research. As noted by Laclau in the introduction of a book on the application of discourse theory to case studies, the articulation of an

alternative approach to the understanding of the structuralism of socio-political spaces by articulating a novel conception of discourse... was constructed out of a plurality of theoretical matrices (post-Heideggerian phenomenology, Wittgenstein's conception of language games, post-structuralism), but it is undoubtedly the latter which has been the chief influence. (Laclau, 2000: xi)

Laclau continues by reminding us that the term post-structuralism covers a vast field of intellectual tendencies, involving authors such as Foucault, Lacan, Derrida and others. In this research, we were influenced by Lacan in constructing the discourse analysis method, especially regarding the notion of the *point de capiton* (or *nodal point* in the discourse theory terminology) that comprises a 'privileged signifier which fixes the meaning of a signifying chain' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 112). The purpose of nodal points is to realise the objective of any discourse, which is to make it dominant in a particular social field. Inspired by the Lacanian theory of the contingency imposed by the Real, the authors of discourse theory understand that no discourse is capable of fully dominating the field of discursivity. A discourse can only partially be fixed by its nodal point, although 'discursive formations consist of related elements that can in certain contexts of exteriority... be signified as a totality' (Howarth, 2000: 102). We also work with the psychoanalytic concept of *dislocation*, as discussed by Laclau (1990), by assuming that discourses are contingent and continuously submitted to the dislocatory effects of social and political events. Such a focus, for Stravakakis, focuses on elevating

to the epicentre of our discourse what is foreclosed in more traditional approaches: the element of negativity inherent in human experience, on the element of rupture and crisis threatening and subverting the field of social objectivity. (Stravakakis 2000: 100)

Stravakakis' interpretation of the *dislocation factor* is doubly important to the objectives of this research, to the extent that, in addition to looking for support in the psychoanalytical stream of discourse theory, the author also closely examines

a theme that is very similar to that discussed in this article: the emergence of a *green ideology* in the 1960s and 1970s. Instead of looking for the origin of this new ideology in positively existing causes and rational explanations, the author uses dislocation theory as ‘the moment of failure and subversion of a system of representation [that] introduces a rupture in a normal – or rather normalised – order of things’ (ibid.: 105-106). For Stravakakis, the emergence of the green ideology occurred because of a

lack created by the dislocation of our (imaginary/symbolic) conceptions of nature by a feeling of environmental crisis, a lack that coincided with another lack created by the dislocation of certain currents of ideological discourse in the radical political spectrum. (ibid.: 107)

It is important to emphasise that what the author refers to as ‘green ideology’, which results from a double dislocation, is restricted to different versions of parties, movements, groups and ideologies that have a radical environmental agenda. In many other cases, such as eco-feminism, eco-socialism, eco-fascism and eco-capitalism, the green element remains ideologically peripheral. Because of this, when we analyse the production of the environmentally responsible consumer by the business media, we know that we are not dealing with the field of green ideology. Therefore, the first dislocation is of interest to the purposes of this work: the dislocation related to our way of understanding nature, which has generated the perception of an ecological crisis and, consequently, the ‘new environmental paradigm’ (ibid.: 109). By creating a void at the level of meaning, dislocation promotes ‘new discursive constructions, which attempt to suture the dislocated structure’ (Howarth and Stravakakis, 2000: 13). The dislocation that resulted in the new environmental paradigm starting from the 1960s and 1970s has been continuously re-signified and has gained a special importance in contemporary political discourse.

According to discourse theory, then, ‘a discursive structure is not merely a ‘cognitive’ or ‘contemplative’ entity; it is an *articulatory practice* which constitutes and organises social relations’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001:96, the authors’ italics). Taking an example of this definition from *Thatcherism*, which in turn can be taken as a typical example of the predominance of the neoliberal ideology that will be presented and discussed in this paper, David Howarth shows that

the ideas, policies and actions of Thatcherism can be seen as a discourse. Not only did it consist of a set of ideas (‘freedom’, ‘monetarism’, ‘law and order’), it also inculcated a certain set of practices (‘strong leadership’, ‘entrepreneurship’) and involved attempts to transform institutions and organisations. (Howarth, 2000: 103)

Within a context that is restricted to the marketing field, this discursive re-articulation refers to issues that are related to the responsibility of the consumer with regard to guilt and redemption by the market. This is the anchor point of this article. The above studies indicate just how dominant the role of the media has been at times of dislocation and the need for new articulations, especially when constructing the current environmental crisis scenario (Yearley, 1991; Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002). It is obvious that the media exercise a type of 'soft power' to the extent that they have no regulatory authority in the sense of establishing policies and law. Their power lies in constructing truths. In the theoretical and methodological field in which this paper is situated, it is understood that this is a powerful force. *The Economist*, one of the magazines analysed in this research, itself emphasizes the importance of green business by noting how important the media are in the construction and dissemination of green consumption practices:

Al Gore's documentary on global warming, 'An inconvenient truth', helped get Hollywood on board. Last summer Brad Pitt teamed up with Global Green, a non-profit group, in a contest to design environmentally friendly homes for New Orleans. In April Robert Redford's series on ecology and green living was aired. Vanity Fair, Newsweek, Forbes and Fortune magazines have run green issues and Entertainment Weekly, a Hollywood monthly, featured Al Gore on its cover. All this has helped Americans see that green building is easy, rewarding and responsible. The lesson is being learned in Scottsdale, a place whose extraordinary growth in recent decades has often meant swimming pools and green lawns somehow engineered in the desert. At Camelview Village, a multifamily development designed by Mr Hovey's father, who is also an architect, a 'desert garden' covers the roof of each house. It is made of plants that require minimal watering, keep the roof cooler than black roof tiles and absorb lots of carbon dioxide. With 16 months to go until the complex is finished, 586 of the 709 units have been sold already. At Sterling Ridge, the Scottsdale property, solar panels and energy efficient glass will keep windows cool in the searing Arizona summers. The power savings are phenomenal, Mr Hovey junior says. (*Economist*, 2007)

Based on an analysis of the business media discourse, this article demonstrates how the dislocation in the concept of nature, which has led to the contemporary concept of environmental crisis and consequently to a new environmental paradigm, has been re-signified by the media and marketing discourse with the aim of developing a new discursive articulation based on the production of guilt and the promotion of redemption as merchandise. We suggest that an analysis of the business media, especially of a publication like *The Economist*, helps us to understand how the dislocation that resulted in the new environmental paradigm has also been re-signified by neoliberal ideology. The responsible consumer discourse can be understood as a reflection of neoliberal thinking that has sought to rearticulate the environmental crisis discourse around the belief in science, the free market, individual initiative and other elements.

Empirical research: *The Economist* and *Exame*

Method and Procedures

Bearing in mind that the analysis period of the two magazines was extensive (1996-2007), we chose to use text-reading support software (Atlas t.i). We sought to include the term *responsible consumer* because the media use many terms, as does the academic world, when defining a type of consumption that is marked by a concern for the environment. According to the meaning provided by discourse theory, these terms would be *elements*, ‘signs whose meanings have not yet been fixed; signs that have multiple, potential meanings (i.e. they are *polysemic*)’ (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002: 27). A set of the definitions that are most widely used in the media and most prevalent in the examined academic literature was created to establish sufficiently broad categories to account for the articles in the two researched magazines during the investigated period. We started with the following categories: conscious consumption/consumer; green; sustainable; ethical-activist; efficient-rational; healthy; responsible.

In addition to these categories of consumers, other terms were highlighted that could indicate the existence of these categories even if they were not explicitly mentioned: Greenpeace, WWF (World Wild Fund), global warming, climate change, environmental movements, Kyoto Protocol, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), environment, sustainability, ecology, recycling, environmentally responsible companies and clean technology. After inserting all of these categories into the programme, reports were generated that indicated how, where and when the magazines directly or indirectly mentioned the theme of responsible consumption. A full interpretation of these reports was undertaken, and some standard reports were employed to identify some of the categories that are central to the analysis and that became predominant over the surveyed time period: environmentalist movements, the role of governments, solutions through science and technology, market opportunities, and the roles of companies and individual consumers.

General Analysis: The environmental crisis and the role of companies and consumers: the relationship between corporate social responsibility and the de-politicisation of consumer

A nodal point – ‘the notion of a particular element assuming a “universal” structuring function within a certain discursive field’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: xi) – found in the discursive construction of the business media was ‘environment’, associated with the idea that nature is in crisis and that something needs to be done about it. In this context, companies and consumers (individuals) appear as fundamental moral agents of this process. The

environmental discourse is therefore articulated with an organisational discourse that focuses on corporate social responsibility (CSR), as well as on a consumer discourse that identifies a type of consumer who is morally engaged in resolving the environmental crisis. In the discursive construction of the business media, purchasing from companies that are socially responsible is the feasible path to becoming a responsible consumer. Others are excluded from this discursive construction, which can be clearly understood within the logic of the social antagonism of discourse theory, whose

role is thus constitutive of social objectivity, as social formations depend upon the construction of antagonistic relations between social agents 'inside' and 'outside' a social formation. (Howarth, 2000: 106)

The disqualification of environmentalist movements in both magazines was evident, indicating that they do not have sufficient and correct information about the environmental situation in addition to often having *suspicious* interests. In the case of *The Economist*, the most critical treatment of the environmentalist movements came within the context of the so-called anti-globalisation movements after the *Battle of Seattle* in 1999. The articles referring to this topic have titles such as 'living with the enemy'; 'non-governmental organisations and business' and 'virtue for sale'. In these years, both magazines were marked by articles that aimed to disqualify activists, although the tone taken in *Exame* was always more radical.

With security high, the few anti-globalisation protesters who were allowed into Qatar had no chance of repeating Seattle. But they were still creative. Small groups used surprise tactics, springing up outside meeting rooms to chant 'Zoellick go home', or plastering the conference walls with enigmatic messages, such as 'Do you know what the green man is up to?' But most non-governmental organisations were too busy lobbying to protest. Greenpeace, the environmental titan, persuaded Pascal Lamy, Europe's top trade man, to visit its boat, Rainbow Warrior, for a photo opportunity. And José Bové, the French farmer famous for driving his tractor into McDonald's, spent much of his time hanging around the press room, pipe in hand. (*Safety*, 2001)

According to the new ideology, the world today is dominated by enormous corporations interested in earning a lot of money at the cost of the health of people and the planet. It is up to the NGOs to assume the heroic role of fighting them. In this struggle, the pillars of the capitalist system need to be challenged – companies, multinational organisms, governments – with all the arms that are at hand. It might be by dressing up as a chicken. It might be by demonstrating at meetings of the International Monetary Fund. It might be by disclosing information that is often doubtful or simply wrong about deforestation in the Amazon and about the impact of the construction of the São Paulo beltway. There was a delay of four years in the granting of the license to build the southern stretch of the project, which was considered fundamental for alleviating traffic in São Paulo, reducing the emission of pollutants from the trucks that cross the city and

improving the quality of life of the population. Among the problems, the NGO Instituto Socioambiental [Socio-environmental Institute] argued that there was a rare type of frog in the region of the construction work. Studies proved that it was a common species. The construction work was only approved in September this year. (Seibel & Gianini, 2006)

In fact, the survey data shows how the construction of environmentally responsible consumers is linked to the construction of companies that are also socially responsible. Initial data from this study also motivated an article (Fontenelle, 2010) whose objective was to determine how the claims promoted by anti-globalisation movements were crucial in the construction of the discourse of socially responsible companies. Thus, the analysis of the data reinforces the literature that exists about how the responsible consumer, considered from the perspective of the business context that is of interest to us, is inseparable from the emergence of the discourse of corporate social responsibility, which became dominant at the dawn of the 21st century (Caruana and Crane, 2008; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004; Harrison et al., 2005).

Just as corporations have been exhorted to practise corporate social responsibility (CSR), so too have consumers been charged with a responsibility to use their 'purchase votes' to effect positive social outcomes. (Caruana and Crane, 2008)

These fragments of discourse clearly indicate that the path to responsible consumption does not involve conflict and political protest. It is in this context that consumers are beginning to appear, in a construction that aims to demonstrate their strength/force, but distances them from movements that are perceived as negative:

The power of the green wave is currently manifested through what I call eco-awareness, or the attitude of people who realise the importance of nature for our own survival. As soon as eco-awareness reached the general population, it became irreversible. It is this phenomenon that we are observing now, not only in the First World but also in countries such as Brazil. If consumers give preference to products that protect nature, those manufacturers that do not change their conventional products are going to lose market share. (Richers, 1996)

There is an apparently ambiguous relationship with the government, where any type of regulation is judged as being a mode of censorship or a form of intervention in the free market. At the same time, there are articles in which the government is called upon *to act*. Such articles always indicate that the government has been incapable of acting, which is why companies need to act in its place.

But the systematic subordination of this profit for environmental or social factors leads to risks. The first, and largest, of these is in the dangerous confusion of roles between the State and the private sector. It is very convenient for a bankrupt

government to push tasks that are its responsibility in the direction of companies. When the State fails so miserably, companies are encouraged to do what it has neglected, says economist Eduardo Giannetti da Fonseca. (Gurovitz and Blecher, 2005)

The new initiatives championed by Mrs Merkel might just add to the embarrassment. The EU's politicians are not only telling businesses to cut emissions, but also dictating how they should do it (rather like communist central planning, muttered the Czech prime minister, accurately). (*Climate*, 2007)

While players such as governments and social movements appear with their disqualification discourse, companies present themselves in this discursive construction as playing a central and predominantly positive role. There is a certainty in solving the environmental crisis through the use of technology linked to successful corporate initiatives. The environmental crisis is also a great business opportunity, and entrepreneurship is highly emphasised, especially in the Brazilian magazine:

Many companies, including BP, also see the chance to make money from providing things that help reduce global warming-from clean coal-fired power-stations, to wind farms, to mortgages with better rates for homes that are carbon-neutral. GE plans to double its revenues from 17 clean-technology businesses to \$20 billion by 2010. HSBC's decision to become carbon-neutral is part of a plan to develop a carbon-finance business, both for retail consumers and corporate clients... (Can, 2006)

'The companies that are now concerned with climate change will be the leaders in the future', says Philippe Lisbona, director of a new environmental fund created by Stratus Bank. Or, as British environmentalist, Jonathon Porritt writes in his book, *Capitalism – Why the world matters*, which is still unpublished in Brazil: 'Preservation of the planet may be the biggest business opportunity of this century'. (Teixeira Jr., 2006)

It is in this context that the construction of the responsible consumer occurs in a permanent dialogue with environmentally responsible companies that will only be able to sustain this role if they have a consumer as a counterpoint, an individual who is also morally engaged, feels responsible and knows how to value these corporate actions. There are many articles that name companies that are working towards mitigating environmental damage and mention how consumers must recognise such actions through consumption. The responsible consumer is here constructed as someone who is well-informed about the environmental crisis, decides with his *conscience*, and is morally responsible with regard to the consumption choices he or she makes.

One of the main voices in the Brazilian articles that mentioned *conscious consumption*, a more common term in Brazil, is the Akatu Institute for Conscious Consumption, an NGO that evolved from within the Companies and Social

Responsibility Institute (ETHOS), therefore relating CSR to the responsible consumer. In other words, in Brazil, the debate about responsible consumption has already been launched by a movement of business people without the participation of the consumers who are associated with social or environmental movements.

The business world has increasingly been worrying about a figure who, in many ways, is unfathomable – the conscientious consumer. The difficulty, however, lies in defining precisely who he is and how he thinks and acts when choosing between one product or service or another. The Akatu Institute, an NGO whose mission is to encourage responsible behaviour among Brazilian consumers, has carried out research to determine the level of awareness of the population when making purchases. (Almeida, 2004)

In a discursive context that produces the idea that protesting is negative, as previously mentioned, action and individual responsibility become predominant in the media discourse. In this context, the consumer is free to make his own decisions and impose his limits; not doing so leads to the assumption of a guilt that can easily be expiated if he chooses to patronise responsible companies. It is clear that research data cannot indicate if the consumer actually feels guilty and consumes from environmentally responsible companies to expiate his guilt. The research can clearly show, however, that the media have naturalised this mode of response

Bearing in mind the objectives of this paper, the central issue is to understand how this media discourse related to the production of guilt and redemption, far from politicizing the category of the consumer, has the opposite effect. The responsible consumer does not represent a single and unquestionable category. Different players, including environmentalists, companies, governments, academics and the media, are arguing over the definition of this category. Therefore, we need to understand the meaning of the term responsible consumer from a given discursive construction and based on world views and specific interests. The purpose of this paper is to understand this construction in a very particular field: the business media, particularly because we believe they reflect and reinforce a type of responsible consumer who is a follower of the corporate world.

The eleven years' worth of analysed texts reveal that, beyond merely presenting the issue of environmentally responsible consumption as 'business as usual' (Smart, 2010), the magazines clearly deny the idea of the consumer as a political player. It is even possible to state that this is one of their central objectives, given the negative way in which the analysed articles portray any type of critical movement relating to issues involving consumption and the environmental

crisis. It is in this context that the themes of guilt and redemption emerge in different ways and form according to the analysed magazines.

Responsibility, guilt and redemption by the market in the analysed magazines

Let us now examine the meanings that the business media attribute to categories such as responsibility and guilt. Here, we shall differentiate between the discourses of the two magazines for reasons that will subsequently be explained.

The Economist: An environmental discourse that attributes responsibility to the individual through guilt

The Economist empathises with the idealised figure of the responsible consumer in many articles but assumes an accusatory tone in others, indicating that, although this responsibility is necessary, the consumer is still not morally engaged. This led the research to explore the perspective of the production of guilt.

A recent academic study concludes that, although the firms have created favourable attitudes and enjoy high brand loyalty, customers still consider non-green attributes more important in making their purchase decisions. (How, 2000)

How to persuade people to go green? Last month British Airways (BA) announced it would give passengers the chance to do their bit for the planet by letting them pay a few pounds extra on every ticket and use the money to offset the carbon emissions from their trip. Last week the airline admitted that, so far, hardly anybody seems interested, with fewer than 1 in 200 passengers willing to cough up. That sits oddly with people's professed anxiety in polls about climate change. BA points out that the scheme is new. Greens accuse it of failing to do enough advertising. Economists spy an example of what they call revealed preferences - the idea that talk is cheap and actions provide the best guide to somebody's beliefs. The cost of cutting carbon emissions is immediate but benefits are deferred and thinly spread. Appeals to people's better natures tend to fall flat if they involve demands on their wallets [...] BA itself illustrates the point: whatever the airline's green scheme does for the planet, it has done BA's brand no harm. (Virtue, 2005)

Within the context of the articles, it is clear that *The Economist* is operating under the assumption that contemporary consumers should feel guilty about the environmental crisis because they are not always prepared to be environmentally responsible. It is within this context that the discourse of redemption appears in an obvious way:

The sale of indulgences by the Catholic Church in the early 16th century, whereby people could, in effect, purchase forgiveness of past sins by handing over enough money, was condemned by Martin Luther and other reformers. Today, some

environmentalists are denouncing the ‘offsetting’ of carbon emissions in similar terms... critics of offsetting argue that the ability to buy retrospective forgiveness for sins of emission is no substitute for not sinning in the first place. ... Another problem with offset schemes is the lack of standards: can you really trust those who promise to eliminate emissions elsewhere on your behalf? (*Sins*, 2006)

This excerpt indicates the ambiguity of the ‘consume and be redeemed’ action while also showing how important the guarantees of environmentally responsible companies are for redemption. Thus, if the first part of the excerpt uses the critics of offsetting to question the process of consumption to redemption, the second part takes a different approach: it does not question the process itself but instead focuses on the credibility of those who promise to eliminate emissions.

In the excerpt below, the relationship between guilt and redemption is direct, although *The Economist* indicates that it just reflects a market practice. However, considering the methodology used in this research, the media vehicle was taken as an enunciator that has an active position towards its discourses. Thus, the media not only transmit but also create a different way of seeing the environmental crisis from specific nodal points.

If you think you can make the planet better by clever shopping, think again. You might make it worse... If you are worried about the environment, you might buy organic food; if you want to help poor farmers, you can do your bit by buying Fair-trade products; or you can express a dislike of evil multinational companies and rampant globalisation by buying only local produce. And the best bit is that shopping, unlike voting, is fun; so you can do good and enjoy yourself at the same time. (*Sins*, 2006)

In *The Economist* magazine, the discourse that builds the environmentally responsible consumer can only be clarified when it accounts for the context of the construction of the enterprise culture, which will be explored later on in this article.

Exame: An environmental discourse that attributes responsibility to the individual through redemption

In the case of the Brazilian magazine, the development from responsibility to guilt and redemption is even stronger, although the tone does not accuse the consumer, who is already constructed as being someone who is morally involved with environmental causes. In this case, guilt is merely an assumption, bearing in mind that the opportunity for redemption through the purchase of products from environmentally responsible companies appears as the main focus. Because it is linked to the business world much more directly than *The Economist*, the case of *Exame* demonstrates just how much this closeness allows its discursive

production to be less ambiguous and its discourse more univocal. The following report shows how this mentality is absorbed by the discursive construction of the business media based on the logic of redemption:

In using the Ipiranga Zero Carbon credit card to fill his tank, the consumer has the company's commitment that trees will be planted to neutralise the vehicle's greenhouse gas emissions. (Herzog, 2007)

By engaging the identity of the consumer as being individually responsible for his consumption acts, the business media reflect and re-signify a marketing logic of guilt production, while at the same time presenting a way of moderating this guilt through the sale of redemption. They propose a series of products and measures that *reduce guilt* through consumption in a society permeated by the discourse of global warming, such as through buying ecologically responsible organic products or investing in neutralising carbon through the planting of trees. Therefore, the consumer does not need to concern himself with consuming products that have already given him the guarantee of making the right choice: in consuming ecologically responsible products, he can rid himself of his guilt because others have made themselves responsible for him. He only has to be responsible when taking a decision about which product or brand to buy, or after consuming it, about neutralising his ecological footprint.

If in *The Economist*, the environmentally responsible consumer must be constructed under the main discourse of the morally engaged consumer of the enterprise culture, in the case of *Exame*, the environmentally responsible consumer emerges under the larger discourse of the business opportunity that arises from the existence of this type of responsible consumer who purchases from corporations that are also environmentally responsible. The responsible consumer also appears to be individually engaged in the resolution of the environmental crisis through his purchases. Such data are very similar to what Jorgensen and Phillips found in their research. The authors noted how 'ecological discourse is articulated together with a consumer discourse: personal engagement is defined as consumption behaviour' (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002: 166). Having therefore presented a broader panorama of the research, and keeping in mind the context of the discourse of de-politicisation and production of guilt and redemption, we now return to examining the two main axes of this paper's analysis in more detail.

A return to moral sentiments: Responsibility and consumer guilt within the context of the enterprise culture

As we have already seen in the review of the literature as well as in our data, the responsible consumer is constructed as an individual who thinks about the impacts of his consumption decisions, which, in turn, are reflected in his choices regarding the companies that satisfy his social and environmental concerns (Dickinson and Carsky, 2005). This analysis shows that this responsible consumer has accepted the notion of consumer sovereignty, especially in terms of empowerment (Schwarzkopf, 2011; Wright, Newman and Dennis, 2006).

However, there is another perspective that is less explored by studies on the responsible consumer and that stands out in the discourse of the analysed business media: that of the philosophical basis of the liberal project, which takes us back to the theme of moral sentiments. These are understood as a *conservative reaction* to a more calculating view of the 'homo oeconomicus of interests' of the liberal economy (Foucault, 2004; Laval, 2007; Dardot and Laval, 2009) and which, reinterpreted within the context of the enterprise culture, indicates a first elucidation of the production of guilt in the media and marketing discourse. As shown in an interesting study of contemporary relations between economic man and emotional power, the theme of moral sentiments arose in opposition to the concept of a society that was implicated in calculating interests, seeking to 'preserve and re-establish the traditional moral authorities that were progressively dislocated by the economic relations of the free market and by new forms of government' (Andrade, 2011: 39). The study also indicates how this type of thinking has strong moral and religious origins and how, in this context, individuals were summoned to submit to moral laws and sacrifice themselves in the name of the common good.

Much could be said about the different forms taken by the conservative discourse, which promoted moral sentiments and their impact on the field of consumption. However, it suits the purposes of this paper to more precisely understand how these notions have been rearticulated in contemporary society and reflected in the discourse about the responsible consumer within the media and marketing contexts. We therefore need to understand the way in which interests and moral sentiments were re-signified by the neoliberal movement that was dominant in the West and whose most emblematic governments were those of US president Ronald Reagan and British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, although this movement also affected a large part of the Western world, including Brazil. The neoliberal programme is very extensive, and this article does not intend to examine it all. The intention is only to understand how, within its context, consumption gains a new and central dimension when the

principle of consumer sovereignty and the idea of the individual as a moral agent are combined. Various studies have been undertaken, especially in the United Kingdom, on how this re-articulation occurred around the construction of an *enterprise culture* (Keat and Abercrombie, 1991; Peters, 2001; Norris, 2001; Heelas and Morris, 1992).

The promotion of an enterprise culture begins by reinforcing the importance of consumer sovereignty, which was already extremely prevalent in marketing discourses about the culture of consumption, but also includes the notion of a consumer who is morally responsible for his choices, something that is still rarely discussed in these same discourses. Consumer sovereignty therefore became ‘the link between freedom and dynamism. The model of consumer choice came to be seen as the most adequate model for *all* forms of modern citizenship and social action...’ (Slater, 1997: 37; the author’s italics). However, this empowered consumer had to be equally willing ‘to take risks and to accept responsibility for his actions...’ (Keat and Abercrombie, 1991:3). Benevolence, moral conscience and a sense of the common good, the basic pillars of the conservative reaction found in the history of liberal philosophical thinking (Andrade, 2011), also begin to form part of this new neoliberal conservative turnaround, especially in the reform programme proposed by Margaret Thatcher based on the following principle: ‘Economics are the method. The object is to change the soul’ (Heelas and Morris, 1992: 8).

In this moralistic crusade of the *conversion of souls*, a discourse about guilt also begins to be outlined: individuals ‘have only themselves to blame if they do not bother to set about improving their circumstances’ (Heelas and Morris, 1992:8). Guilt refers to the wrong choices made by the sovereign individual who is responsible for his actions. No one can be blamed for unemployment, poverty or the harmful consequences of consumption of a certain type of product (alcohol, tobacco, junk food) except the autonomous self, who is capable of freely taking responsibility for the consequences of his choices (Rose, 1992; 2007).

From the analysis of each category that was constructed for the survey of the magazine articles — conscientious consumption/consumer, green, sustainable, ethical-activist, efficient-rational, healthy, responsible — it was possible to observe how this idea of consumers as moral and responsible agents who were possibly blamed for their wrong choices clearly articulated this view of the enterprise culture. For example, in the ‘healthy consumption’ category, there were different articles in both magazines about the accountability of consumers for the choices they made relative to their health and quality of life.

A recent conference in Washington brought together some 100 lawyers from the biggest food companies to discuss ways of defending themselves against legal proceedings. One of the recommendations was that if the case reaches trial, those chosen for the jury should be physically active. They would tend to sympathise with the idea that controlling weight is a question of individual responsibility. (Cohen, 2004)

New research shows that most Americans are well aware of the risks of obesity... some 90% of American consumers believe they are personally accountable for their weight. (Big, 2003)

We can see that the consumer as moral agent also clearly appears in relation to the field of fair trade.

A growing number of coffee drinkers seem to prefer their morning grande skinny latte without a foul-tasting double-shot of social injustice. The hugely successful Fair trade brand allows coffee addicts to get their fix with a clearer conscience, safe in the belief that no farmers have been exploited along the way. Coffee has become a testing ground for what it means to be an ethical consumer. (Storm, 2006)

If we were to pause to analyse each specific consumer category, we would see different discursive articulations. In the case of healthy consumption, for example, the main articulation has to do with litigation because of the challenges that it poses to the corporations in the context of the dissemination of 'a culture of blame' (Lau, 2009). In the case of ethical consumption, fair trade appears in the headlines because of the consumer movements that have invested in denouncing the abusive practices of companies, thus affecting their corporate images (Fontenelle, 2010). In this study, the focus on responsible consumption via the environment requires that we examine another type of discursive articulation in more detail: the environmental crisis.

Guilt and redemption in the construction of the environmental crisis

We have already seen that green ideology emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as the product of an articulation between a series of political elements and involved a certain concept of nature. Problematic consumption can already be localised in this period by authors and environmentalists who represent the radical ecological movements of the 1960s and who were already connecting the consumerism of modern societies with environmental degradation (Stravakakis, 2000). However, as stated in the introduction of this article, this did not occur from the perspective of the hegemonic environmental movement. According to Cohen (2001), *The Limits of Growth* report, which was published in 1972 and is considered a milestone in the history of the hegemonic environmental movement, makes no explicit mention of the question of consumption as a social

activity. It was only on the perspective of industrial production, and this continued at least until the 1990s when there was a dislocation of the emphasis from production to consumption, which coincided with an historic moment in which various authors started referencing the shift of contemporary societal paradigms from production towards consumption.

For Portilho (2005), an event that clearly marks this discursive dislocation was Eco-92, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. It was at this conference that the term *sustainable development* first appeared, as proposed by the UN report produced in 1987, *Our Common Future*, which expressed its total confidence in the capacity of technological developments and economic expansion to satisfactorily manage environmental problems.

This confidence in technological capability is evident in the articles we analysed. It is no accident that Gro Harlem Brundtland, the Norwegian who was the head of the UN commission that produced the report and is considered to be the creator of the term *sustainable development*, admitted that the broader notion of sustainable development has been 'kidnapped' by companies. Sustainable development, she says, is something broader and the concept in its totality, the vision of economic, environmental and social pillars with a long-term approach never happened anywhere (Roge, 2012).

According to Cohen (2001), other players (social/environmental movements and developing countries) challenged the interpretation of the UN report and incorporated the debate about consumption into the discussion agenda, especially regarding lifestyles in rich countries. The focus on consumption as a factor in the environmental crisis, however, cannot be considered sufficient in causing wider public environmental awareness (which already existed in the ecological movement). According to Yearley, 'the existence of social problems depends on the continued existence of groups or agencies that define some condition as a problem and attempt to do something about it' (Yearley, 1991: 103). For this author, to generate a certain environmental conscience, environmentalist groups and the media have played a central role in the construction and promotion of contemporary environmental issues with society.

It is important, therefore, to understand how these players have constructed the discourse about the environmental crisis and how consumption appears in this context. Stravakakis argues that the construction of the environmental crisis was caused by a dislocation of our imaginary and symbolic concept of nature. In other words, beyond the experience of a real ecological crisis, there has, more importantly, been a dislocation of our imaginary and symbolic construction of

the Real of nature, which has led to the consequent construction of the environmental crisis as a serious, urgent and pressing social problem. Stravakakis uses Lacanian analyses of the Real, especially in Zizek's interpretation of how the ecological crisis started a period of encounters with the Real (Zizek, 1993), given that our representation of nature, which always incorporated a notion of the severity and unforeseeability of natural forces, has suffered new shocks in contemporaneity. As a matter of fact, Zizek suggests a new twist to the title of the Freudian study on cultural malaise because currently 'discontentment moves from culture to nature itself: it now appears as a fragile mechanism that may explode at any moment in a catastrophic way' (Zizek, 2011: 430). Throughout history, every age has sought to integrate a concept of nature, while at the same time trying to dominate it. According to Stravakakis,

In modern secular techno-scientific societies it is usually science that provides the symbolic framework for the symbolisation of nature. Predicting the unpredictable, mastering the impossible, reducing the unexpected to a system of control, in other words symbolising, integrating the real of nature, is attempted through the discourse of science and its popularisation in the media. (Stravakakis, 2000: 108)

However, this ideal is morally in crisis. Science itself, by way of technological development, has been accused of causing the environmental crisis. Analysts of the environmental crisis have insisted that it is impossible for science to cope with the challenges presented by environmental degradation except through a radical change in our development model. It is within this context that indicated the limits of nature that criticism of consumption emerges, given that consumer society is structured upon the idea that nature is subject to limitless consumption. Here, we should ask some questions posed by the study developed by Corbucci (2011):

What is the relationship between the consequences of a society subjectively based on consumerism and a certain representation of nature? What nature exists (beyond the one that is barely surviving) in consumerism? Or rather, what type of representation of nature is consistent with a society in which merchandise form gains full status? (Corbucci, 2011: 34)

Corbucci tried to investigate the dominant imaginary with regard to 'Nature' and 'future life', a future life that can be understood in light of the construction of environmental discourses based on an analysis of images used in generalised environmental awareness-building media campaigns (e.g., Brazil's most popular magazine, *Veja*; a business magazine, *Isto é*; a magazine that specialises in sustainability, *Página 22* and the websites of some environmental movements, such as *Greenpeace*). Using a psychoanalytical approach, the conclusion is that what is in play in these images is an 'aesthetic of the pulse of death', based on a portrayal of degraded environments and apocalyptic phenomena. This

eschatological scenario, the destruction of the Earth and especially of mankind, is in fact recurrent in environmental articles and the media and has invoked the feeling of guilt as ‘something that is characteristic of the impasse of man with culture and civilisation, regardless of the cultural formation in which it develops’ (Corbucci, 2011: 163). Discourses about environmental catastrophes related to blaming our daily acts of consumption have also been recurrent in documentaries, such as *An inconvenient truth*, by former US vice-president Al Gore, and films such as *The day after tomorrow*, which are two prominent examples.

The problem, as Corbucci’s study demonstrated, is that feelings of guilt combined with feelings of catastrophe act are immobilising. This is why the author shows how the images of destruction aired by the environmental *awareness* campaigns invite individuals to express a fundamental ambivalence:

On the one hand such images may be taken as an expression of good sense and of the desire to avoid catastrophe: they justify the need for risk prevention through technological investments and a change in daily habits. On the other hand they present an irresistible and inexorable spectacle; the power of man to destroy what before was considered indestructible. (Corbucci, 2011:164)

Final considerations

According to discourse theory, dislocation leads to different reactions and discursive articulations. This study has tried to demonstrate how the business media has dealt with this issue in the construction of the responsible consumer. It is interesting to note that references to environmental catastrophes, the need to save the planet and the extinction of certain species are not the key points in the articles analysed in this research. Such themes are surreptitiously interspersed in the texts merely to sustain other central arguments: the power of science and technology, the proactive role of companies in their responses to the environmental crisis, the guilt and de-politicisation of consumers and the possibility of their redemption through the market.

The production of guilt is especially linked to this broader crisis scenario and the possibility of an environmental hecatomb, which is reported upon by the broader media; but what is emphasised is the possibility of consumers to redeem themselves through responsible consumption. One of the nodal points of the media and marketing discourse is the ‘environment’, with the two magazines rearticulating this notion in their own terms: the environmental crisis is not presented from the perspective of nature but from the perspective of the agents that are central to this process, which are companies and responsible consumers.

Continuing with the discourse theory we therefore observe how the construction of the responsible consumer by the business media may be understood as the articulation of a number of pre-existing elements (climate change, the environmental crisis, responsibility, ecological conscience) within a new configuration that transforms these meanings, producing a new discourse that results in the proposal of redemption as merchandise; in other words, it is not necessary to stop consuming, but to consume in the right way, from the right companies.

In this scenario, there is no politicisation but a market of redemption: from the end of consumption to consumption of the end. This is why consumer movements that are critical of the consumer society are denied. Our consumption patterns can only be questioned with the permission of and regulation by the consumer society itself with the purpose of defending it. The most telling example of this is the way in which the most radical activists involved with the defence of the environment have been classified as 'domestic terrorists' (Smith, 2008). By radicalising their criticism of consumption and vandalising the icons of consumer society, these eco-terrorists, who in Lacanian terms could be considered the *excess* of the consumer society, challenge 'the ideology of endless growth and cornucopian choice and therefore the ontological security of this model' (Schwarzkopf: 121).

In other words, radical criticism of the consumer society also affects the way in which contemporary society has learned to subjectively constitute itself for at least a century, since the consumer culture became hegemonic. The Real also appears from this perspective of the end of the symbolic references that sustain the idea of the subject of the consumer society evoking, therefore, the theoretical and methodological premise of this research that discourses are constructions that are contingent on reality. This is why this media and marketing discourse can perhaps establish its meanings better in this discursive war about the environmental crisis.

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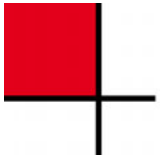
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The potential of consumer publics

Adam Arvidsson

We are used to thinking of consumption as a private affair. Social theory and economics have classically understood the formation of the needs and desires that drive consumer action as something that occurs outside of the public domain; beyond the space of deliberation, driven by ‘the stomach or the fancy’ as Marx put it. And with the rise of a consumer society, such needs and desires have become increasingly administered, subject to techno-scientific discipline and intervention in that typically modern sphere of action, in between the private and the public, that Hannah Arendt (1958) called *society*.

It seems however that this state of affairs is changing. For a couple of decades now, sociologists and consumer researchers have pointed to the active and reflexive processes by which needs and desires are articulated, as consumers re-appropriate the programmed – in Arendt's sense of that term – elements of consumer society and re-elaborate and recreate them according to their own more or less autonomous ideas and visions.

In fact in the last decades we have seen the emergence and consolidation of a range of practices where the boundary between consumption and production is blurred and where both practices fuse into new forms of public action. These range from the value that consumers create around brands and products in their more or less creative and more or less orchestrated forms of interaction, via pursuits like Open Source and Free Software that involve thousands of participants in productive practices that are often motivated by allegiance to particular values or a particular ethos, rather than by direct monetary rewards (Kelty, 2008; O’Neil, 2009), to emerging phenomena like Open Design, Open manufacturing, Urban Agriculture and Open Biotech that apply similar principles to material production (Carson, 2010; Delfanti, 2013). In addition,

similar forms of collaborative production that build on communicative practices of knowledge sharing, and where adherence to a common identity or project counts as a strong motivation, have been identified by management scholars as a strong and growing component to value creation in knowledge intensive organizations (Heckscher and Adler, 2006).

The emergence of these phenomena suggests that a new modality of value creation is affirming itself in the information economy. Moving outside of the traditional domains of markets and hierarchies, such forms of collaborative production are self-organized and they rely heavily on common resources (Bauwens, 2005; Benkler, 2006). Moreover, they contain a strong civic element in the sense that the values that are being created are not only economic but also ethical in a more traditional sense of that term (Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006; Coleman, 2012). In this article I will look at the phenomenon of collaborative consumer practices as one instance of this new emerging ‘mode of production’ (a strong term perhaps), in order to attempt to flesh out a theoretical vision of such collaborative production. I use the cautious term ‘theoretical vision’ because, since these are phenomena in emergence available data are scarce (but growing), and one needs to extrapolate and imagine a lot to fill the gaps. This article is thus a highly speculative piece; it seeks to envision what a theory could look like.

I will suggest that such a vision can be built by departing from the concepts of ‘publics’ and ‘action’ in a sense that combines the traditions of Gabriel Tarde and Hannah Arendt. In this essay I thus want to build a theory of consumption as *public action*. First, I will revisit the tradition of research that has emerged around the phenomenon of productive consumer practices to suggest that an approach that departs from the term ‘publics’ offers a description of these phenomena that is both empirically more adequate and theoretically richer. Following this, I want to draw on Gabriel Tarde’s work to better understand how value is actually produced in these processes. Finally, I want to speculate on how such value-creating publics create *values* also in the non-economic, ethical sense of the term, and how such a new ethics of consumer publics can become an ‘original part’, what in the *Magna Moralia* Aristotle calls a *méros kai archè* – of a new possible politics. But first, let us look a bit more closely at the phenomenon of productive consumption.

Productive consumption

Since the 1970s theoretical attention to the productive elements of consumer action has passed from cultural studies into marketing and what is now known as Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). While the

phenomenon of 'productive consumption' is much older, dating back to the very origins of modern consumer society, and possibly even further (Sassatelli, 2007), theoretical attention to this phenomenon has developed, in part, as a result of its real emergence. Indeed, the last four decades, roughly coinciding with the rise of an 'information society', have seen a shift in the very nature of consumer culture. To put it very bluntly: up until the 1960s, consumer goods were principally, although not exclusively, used to signify and demarcate established social identities. Since the 1960s they have increasingly been used by an ever broader strata of the population to create and develop such identities (Arvidsson, 2006: 17-40). This has given the circulation of consumer goods a necessarily productive dimension. On a more empirical level, this large-scale shift can be said to have been driven by three interconnected tendencies.

First, the very development of consumer society has resulted in a diffusion of consumer goods that can be used productively. In particular, through the diffusion of technologies for cultural production (like video and digital cameras, and, later, editing software) the costs of cultural production have greatly reduced, enabling a wider range of people to take part in these activities. *Second*, the mediatization of consumer goods and social relations in general has greatly enhanced the 'signifying power' of consumer goods. By being inserted in a global media circuit, a branded item can condense meanings in new and highly efficient ways (Lash and Lury, 2006). At the same time, the diffusion of information and communication technologies has greatly reduced the costs of association, making it easier for enthusiastic consumers to find each other and collaborate in the production of immaterial as well as, increasingly, material wealth. *Finally*, with higher levels of education combined with higher levels of graduate unemployment, in particular among arts and humanities, graduates have combined to create a 'cognitive surplus' (Shirky, 2010) of people who have the skill and time to undertake new forms of collaborative productive activities where the line between consumption and production is blurred (for example, in urban creative 'scenes') (Lloyd, 2006).

What consumers produce is largely limited to the immaterial or informational content of commodities (although tendencies like Open Design and Open Manufacturing point at the possibility of organizing the *material* production of goods in similar ways, see Carson, 2010). It is the informational value of commodities that changes and is elaborated as they circulate through a wide range of diverse practices, acquire different meanings and get associated with distinct lifestyles and identities. Consumer researchers have generally left the precise nature of this process of immaterial production untouched. However, management and organizational theorists, along with post-autonomist Marxists, have spent quite some effort on identifying the nature of organization of the

highly similar processes in which information (or knowledge) is created, or creatively elaborated, as it circulates in knowledge intensive organizations (Heckscher and Adler, 2006; Lazzarato, 1997). They have identified four chief characteristics of what some of them define as a new 'informational' mode of production particular to the 'knowledge economy' (Adler, 2001), or to 'cognitive capitalism' (Moulier-Boutang, 2002). Let us try to apply those insights to processes of productive consumption.

First, such practices generally unfold beyond the direct control of markets and hierarchies. Instead, they take the form of diffuse forms of collaboration that involve a wide diversity of different actors that belong to different organizations, or as in the case of most consumers, to no organizations at all. *Second*, these productive practices are based on a blurring of consumption and production in the sense that the use or enjoyment of the consumer products around which they are organized generally depends on or is enhanced by some form of productive contribution (for example, adding to the ongoing narrative of a World of Warcraft guild or suggesting innovative ways to use consumer products). *Third*, these practices are generally self-organized, and participants play an important role in developing organizational forms in relation to the changing requirements of the situation at hand. As has been identified by a number of studies on collaborative networks of Open or Free software production (O'Mahony and Ferraro, 2007), as well as 'brand communities' or 'consumer tribes' of various kinds (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Cova, et al., 2007), this means that participants engage in a large amount of deliberation where goals, aims and productive organization are decided on as a matter of course. Of course, to the extent that such productive networks are initiated and maintained by corporations, this element of bottom-up deliberation clashes with and confronts top-down attempts at corporate control, contributing to perceptions, on the part of management, of these practices as evasive and uncontrollable (Fisher and Smith, 2011; Gabriel and Lang, 1995).

Fourth and finally, productive processes in these collaborative networks principally deploy common resources, like the common knowledge available to members of an Open Source software network, or the common culture that has consolidated around a brand and its uses. These processes are collaborative in the sense that even though individual consumers can add to, reinvent and re-elaborate the meaning and value of consumer goods individually, value is generally understood to have been created when such innovations are added to a pool of common resources that can subsequently feed into the creativity and elaboration of others. It is the common pursuit of a particular goal, be this 'creativity' in a team of knowledge workers or the greatness of the Apple brand, for example, which defines the value of contributions. In other words, value is related not to individual effort *per se*, but to the comprehensive contribution that

such an effort makes to the ‘circulation of the common’, to use Nick Dyer-Witheford’s (2009) phrase.

Such ‘value’ shows no linear relation to the ‘labor time’ that an individual user puts in (Fuchs, 2010). In other words, it is not the time you spend practicing on your guitar that determines whether your song will be a hit! This also means that the tangible outcome of these productive practices (e.g. lines of code, pages of fan fiction, stylistic innovation in brand use) are put back into the common domain and as such remain without any monetary value. Consequently, and this has baffled many observers, there is no discernible link between concrete productive participations and the expectation of monetary gain (Lerner and Tirole, 2002). This has led many observers, coming from widely different perspectives, to suggest that such collaborative practices are the harbingers of a new altruistic mode of production where monetary rewards, and by implication traditional conceptions of economic rationality, no longer apply (e.g. Barbrook, 1998; Benkler, 2011; Adler, 2001).

I believe that this is something of a premature conclusion. It is definitely possible to reconstruct an economic rationality around participation in practices of collaborative production. But it is a different rationality than that proposed by neoclassical economics. I will suggest that it is better understood as a civic, or ethical, rationality in which motives of economic gain and motives that have to do with the excellence of civic action tend to coincide, or at least approach one another. In the last section of this article I will elaborate further on how I think that is happening. But first, let me address the question of how these practices should be conceived of conceptually.

Publics

The popularity of communities on the Internet has captured the attention of marketing professionals. Indeed, the word ‘community’ seems poised to overtake ‘relationship’ as that new marketing buzz-word. So-called ‘community brands’ like the Geocities Web site (‘home’ of more than three million community members ‘living’ in 41 ‘neighborhoods’) provide communication media for hundreds and thousands of individuals who share common interests. (McWilliam, 2000: 43)

This prophecy, taken from one of the pioneering articles to launch the concept of ‘communities’ as a new way for marketers to conceive of and address the phenomenon of productive consumer action, was certainly right in predicting the success of this buzzword. (The Google Ngram Viewer shows how the frequency of the term ‘brand community’ in the English language books scanned by Google increased fourfold between 2000 and 2008). At the same time the frequent use of quotation marks seems to signal a certain hesitation about the semantic

adequacy of this term. Clearly, phenomena like the now defunct Geocities web space with its 'more than three million members' are not to be understood as communities, at least not in anything that resembles the significance that the term originally held in social theory (not to speak of Facebook or YouTube that are most definitely *not* communities).

In social theory, the term 'community' denotes a social formation marked by dense webs of interpersonal interaction and a durable attachment to a shared territory or, at least, identity. It is certainly possible to find collective practices of productive consumption that take the form of communities. Consumer research has arguably come to privilege the study of such practices, as a result of its embrace of ethnography or 'netnography' (Kozinets, 2010) as a methodological strategy. Moreover, it might be true that up until a decade ago the term 'community' offered a more reasonable description of how consumers came together to create meaning and value around brands (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), how people shared and co-created information online (for example, in virtual communities, see Rheingold, 1993) and how knowledge workers worked together in collaborative communities, whether inside companies or in peer-to-peer networks. But this term is no longer particularly representative of how collaborative processes of consumption/production function today. This is so for principally three reasons.

First, and at a very basic level, there has been a shift in consumer culture from a reproductive to a productive phase, where consumers are expected to make active use of commodities in creating individual life-style statements, something that sociologists have identified as a key feature of our times ever since the bygone days of 'postmodernity' (Featherstone, 1991). Such a shift implies, per definition, that productive consumer practices have become an ordinary pursuit for ordinary people. While theorists of 'the postmodern' might have exaggerated the representativeness of this tendency back in the 1980s, recent decades have produced a number of detailed studies that clearly show that such practices of productive consumption has become part of the everyday business of, at least, the 'New Class' of knowledge workers (for an overview see Arvidsson, 2006). To put it simply, you do not need to be a member of a 'community' to engage in productive consumption; in fact, you are expected to do this, at some level of activity, as part of your normal life course.

Naturally this productivity of consumption has been aided by the mediatization of consumer culture, global consumer culture and global brands, the flourishing DIY culture aided by a plethora of television chefs and reality shows dedicated to home decoration, and, of course, by the diffusion of internet connectivity. The internet, and in particular social media, have both greatly extended the number

of people who participate in productive consumer practices and the ways in which they participate. If, in the 1990s, the principal way of participating in and creating value for a brand consisted in taking part in forums, mailing lists and other participatory media that were biased to interpersonal communication, it is far more common for consumers today to create value for a brand by re-tweeting its communication of simply 'liking' its viral communications on Facebook. There is accumulating evidence that most forms of online consumer action involve such looser and more transitory forms of engagements with brands and products: posting once or twice in a blog, looking up an online forum on motherhood to ask a question about a branded product and then never coming back again, and so on (for an overview see Colleoni, 2012)

Moreover, while marketing approaches tended previously to focus on the crucial role played by a small community of influencers in creating and diffusing buzz and opinion, recent approaches that rely on large amount of digital data have instead pointed to the role of a large mass of loosely connected individuals. Watts and Dodds, for example, suggest that information diffusion is driven 'not by *influentials* but by a critical mass of easily influenced individuals' (Watts and Dodds, 2007: 441; see also Brown and Reingen, 1987). Such 'accidental influencers', as they call them, are not connected to each other by strong webs of interpersonal interaction, but by weaker forms of mediated association, like re-tweeting a message. Consequently, marketing strategies aim at discovering and promoting the ability of such loosely-associated individuals to create buzz in a coordinated way (Hansen et al., 2011), and to enhance the 'network value' of such associations (Domingos and Richardson, 2011; Cha, et al. 2010). Such loose and fragmented forms of attention are difficult to subsume under the term 'community' because they do not involve sustained relations of interpersonal interaction with other members. There is also accumulating evidence that when such direct forms of interaction do occur, 'membership' is highly transitory. For example, only 58 per cent of those who posted in a usenet group subsequently repost, and World of Warcraft guilds replace, on average, 25 per cent of their members per month (Arguella et al., 2006; Ducheneaut, et al. 2005).

Second, to create such wide and loose forms of association among consumers also seems to be the aim of contemporary brand management. Asian brands, for example, aim to create a diffuse sensation of imagined belonging to an Asian identity that is difficult to localize, that thus fosters

new kinds of social relations, enabling connections between people who may have never seen each other yet come to a shared sense of moral responsibility towards the brand and the community to which they perceive themselves as belonging'. (Cayla and Eckhardt, 2008: 216)

In a similar vein, both Lury (2004) and Arvidsson (2006), along with a long list of marketing practitioners, have pointed out how contemporary brand management aims at creating affective connections among consumers. But affective connections do not presuppose or direct interaction. Rather, as Gabriel Tarde (1989[1901]) has pointed out, affective connections depend on the media to foster a 'mental union', a *communio mentale*, among participants to a public without them needing to actually interact with each other, as when a cinema audience is grasped by a common affective intensity, or when the 49 million fans of the Korean pop band *Super Junior* gasp in unison as the lead singer shakes his hips (Shim, 2006; Kittler, 1990). As recent theories of brand management – both critical and practitioner-oriented – suggest, it is precisely in the formation of such disembodied affective associations that value creation occurs (for an overview see Colleoni, 2012). It is of course possible to call such forms of loose association 'communities' (imagined communities, perhaps, as theorized by Anderson, 1983 and Cohen, 1985), but there already exists another social science term for this: 'community without propinquity' (Calhoun, 1998; Weber, 1963). Incidentally, this term also describes how information is created and re-elaborated as it circulated. The term that I want to use is 'publics'.

Gabriel Tarde already drew attention to the social and economic salience of publics in 1901. A public is a mediated association amongst strangers who are united by an affective intensity that is directed towards a common thing (a brand, a celebrity, a news story), however momentarily. Publics are thus weaker forms of association than communities, and participation in a public might be less enduring; one is part of a public while reading the newspaper or while clicking on the 'like' button of Coca Cola's Facebook page. The effects of such participation on identity might be much more transitory and, above all, weaker. Along with these socio-psychological features, publics also designate a different structure of communication. A community is based on direct interaction among its members. While such forms of direct interaction might exist among members of a public as well, what makes them members is not their interaction with each other as such but their common devotion to the thing in common that constitutes the public, the *communio mentale* that they form around it (Tarde, 1989). This *thing* can consist in a common focus of attention, as when a theatre public goes silent as the curtain opens. It can also consist in something more substantial, like a devotion to a common cause such as a working class public held together by a shared political identity. Publics are held together by what moral philosopher Charles Taylor calls a social imaginary, that confers an experience of community among members of a public, however weak (e.g. 'we are the citizens of France', 'we are the true wine connoisseurs', 'we defend open software against corporate profit motives') (Taylor, 2004).

This absence of direct interaction does not necessarily mean that publics are orchestrated from the top down. Some publics might be, in particular those that rely on centralized mass communication. But, as Chris Kelty (2008) and others have suggested, the kinds of publics that develop with digital media tend to be what he calls 'recursive publics'. That is, they are united by a common social imaginary that is, in turn, created and re-elaborated by the members themselves. Such recursive publics are self-organized entities. They are constituted – tautologically – by their ability to organize and maintain the particular imaginary that makes them into publics. As Michael Warner (2002: 56) puts it, 'a public is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse', that is, by the circulation of utterances (in some form or another) that always already understand themselves as addressing the particular public that they are indeed addressing (and the cration of such 'circulation of discourse', and not of tightly-knit communities, was precisely what Arjun Appaduari (1986) already described as the cultural effects of the global circulation of commodities). Of course, in the case of consumer publics the degree of autonomy and self-determination naturally depends on the success with which corporate actors are able to control and orchestrate the social imaginary that unites them. However, the frequency with which marketing discourse addresses consumer publics as ungovernable, chaotic or uncontrollable suggests that such autonomy is difficult to completely eradicate (Zwick et al., 2008).

In any case, as a social form, publics suggest a different modality of co-creation than a community. Simply put, in a community members co-create by cooperating with each other directly. While such forms of co-creation might be a feature of consumer publics, the main modality of creation is different. In a public, the ideal-typical way of co-creating consists in individual, or sub-group, appropriations and re-elaborations of common resources that are subsequently put back into the common domain. Creation in publics is thus not an interpersonal as much as it is a *common* pursuit, uniting a multitude of local and small-scale elaborations that might occur independently of each other, around a common interest or goal. To my mind this seems much more logical as a description of how productive consumption works, and much more in line with existing empirical research. It is also the model of co-creation that is emerging in studies of Free Software and 'large scale collaborative creativity among knowledge workers' (Kelty, 2008; Adler and Chen, 2011).

While some consumers might form communities around, say, the Apple brand, the co-creation of a valuable Apple brand equity is not the effect of all Apple consumers co-operating directly with each other, but of the ability of the Apple platform to connect individual or small-scale community-based forms of cooperation into a common public united around a common social imaginary. It

was precisely this ability to foster an experience of communality in the absence of community that Bernard Cova (1997) pointed to with his concept of the 'linking value' of commodities. I would suggest that such communality without community is a core feature of contemporary consumer culture, and it also a core feature of publics, as Gabriel Tarde described them. So, at a first level, publics seem to offer a more empirically adequate description of the social forms in which contemporary productive consumption takes place, at least in its manifestation as a mass phenomenon. But the concept of publics also allows us to think through the issue of value creation in more innovative ways.

Value (1)

Another conceptual advantage of the term 'publics' is that while 'communities' are classically understood to reproduce a traditional value structure, publics create new values, in the form of 'buzz', reputation and opinion. This value-creating function was one of the reasons that led Gabriel Tarde (1989[1901]) to propose that publics be taken as the modern form of social organization *par excellence*. In this *Psychologie économique* (Tarde, 1902, cf. Hughes, 1961, Latour, 2010), Tarde also suggested that the more the modern economy took the form of a consumer economy, where the commodities produced and the needs catered to were different from those supported by existing traditions, and where public communication was ever more mediatized, this value creating function of publics would play an even greater economic role. Indeed, publics are the 'space' where modern consumer needs are created. But publics produce more than needs. Indeed, in the *Psychologie économique*, Tarde argued that the economic value of modern consumer goods depend to no small degree on the perceptions of their 'truth, beauty and utility' that public communication could sustain. In other words, in a mediated consumer economy, value is not supported by established traditions, nor can it always be arrived at through rational calculation. Instead value is conventional, it is supported by shared public perceptions. And, conversely, the ability of publics to erect and support such conventions thus plays a crucial economic role.

In order to understand how publics can sustain such value conventions we need to depart from a slightly different question. How do members of a public feel that they have something in common – a communality – even if they do not interact with each other, even if there is no community? The answer to this question rests with the 'social imaginary' that keeps the public together, and is able to confer an 'experience' of communality on its members. It is worth noting again that this is a matter of experience, rather than 'reality' (if such a distinction is permissible). In more precise terms, the thing that the community has in

common is *real*, in the sense that it is supported by actually existing social relations that really work as foundations of trust and mutual support. But the experience of communion that the public fosters is *virtual*: it is a matter of an experience, created by a sense of affective proximity to the goals or aims of the public. While this virtual communality might sometimes be actualized, as when the public takes to the street and becomes a crowd, this need not necessarily happen for the experience to 'work', nor do such 'actualizations' need to endure. The public might as well evaporate once the common affective intensity that keeps it together can no longer be sustained. The public is constituted and held together by such a common affective intensity. I call this affective intensity its 'ethos'.

The original, archaic meaning of ethos was something like 'dwelling' or 'habitat'. Later this term became central to the Aristotelian tradition where it has come to mean something like 'character' or 'custom', in two interconnected meanings of those terms. In the first rhetorical sense, *ethos* denotes the emotional character of a speaker that allows him or her to bond with his or her audience and affect their interpretation of what he or she says in a particular way. That is, a public endowed with a particular ethos will interpret the world (slightly) differently. It might, for example, conceive of Apple products as so superior that it is worth spending a rainy night queuing outside an Apple store when the new iPad is launched. In the contemporary economy a public ethos, in the aesthetic sense of that term- as a convention that allows an interpretation- plays a central role in supporting the value of contemporary brands. In their current phase of development, brands have become more than mere symbols, they have become objectifications of a particular way of living with commodities, a particular ethos that permeates relations between people and goods, and between people and other people insofar as these relations are mediated by goods (Arvidsson, 2006; Lury, 2004; Willmott, 2010). The ethos that a public is able to create and maintain support around a brand supports the ability of a brand to provide a particular consumer experience. This way the public ethos becomes a central component of the use value of brands.

But this ethos has also acquired an important function in supporting the monetary exchange value of brands. In part, this happens in consumer markets, where the different interpretation of value that such an ethos supports can justify large price differences among functionally and aesthetically similar goods. However, the role of such value conventions is arguably most important in financial markets. Indeed, brands are primarily to be understood as financial assets: the combined consequence of the financialization of value and the socialization of production that have marked the development of an information economy is the distancing of the financial value of assets ever further from what

can be accounted for by established valuation systems. In accounting parlance, this difference has acquired the (somewhat inadequate) term 'intangible' values. Travelling under a host of different names, like knowledge capital, social capital, reputation, innovation and so on, intangible assets represent that part of market valuations that cannot be rationally reconstructed from within established accounting frameworks.

This is of course a truth that requires some modification. First, established accounting frameworks have changed to some degree to take account of and rationalize such intangible assets. Second, there is a plethora of methods and strategies that propose frames to permit such rationalization. But, as Salinas and Ambler (2009) suggest, the very variety of the methods and approaches used are themselves an indication that no common rationality prevails. Instead, as recent economic sociology has suggested, the value of such intangible assets are decided when asset valuers interpret, deliberate over and debate various aspects of the performance of companies. Value is then established when analysts arrive at a common frame of interpretation.

For example, the value of Amazon.com changes substantially if it is interpreted as a dot-com company or as a bookseller (Beunza and Garud, 2004). There is growing evidence that the ethos that can be sustained by publics is acquiring a greater influence on the ways in which such interpretative conventions are elaborated. In part this is so because instruments of brand valuation are making increasing use of, at a variety of levels, measurements of the strength and direction of affective investments in brands as core parameters in estimating their value (Lury and Moore, 2010). In addition, the arrival of social media has permitted a new objectification of the affective investments on which such an ethos is grounded. Expressions of affective attachments in social media can be mined and transformed into reputational and sentiment data that can quite easily be included in the information environments where asset valuers operate. Indeed, companies like *General Sentiment* or *EthicalQuote* offer visualizations of social media-based sentiment data as part of information packages directed at brand managers, asset valuers and financial analysts (Arvidsson and Colleoni, 2012). Further, a number of studies have established that public reputation is acquiring an ever more direct effect on the value and performance of companies along a wide range of horizons that go from stock market performance via sales to the ability to innovate or attract talented employees (Orlitsky and Benjamin, 2001).

In short, among asset valuers, at a wide variety of levels, there seems to be an emerging awareness of the Tardian connection between the monetary value of assets and the conventions of their 'truth, beauty and utility' that can be

sustained by consumer (and other) publics. The ability to ‘make’ a public sustain such a perception, through a common affective intensity, is acquiring a concrete role as an important determinant of monetary value in the information economy.

Value (2)

The term *ethos* also has a second meaning. As used in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, *ethos* means something like ‘custom’, a particular set of expectations as to the behaviour of a virtuous person (or citizen). In this sense a virtuous character (or excellent character) – *ethiké areté* – denotes a set of predispositions that enables a person to ‘live well’ with others. The *ethos* of a public also generally contains a notion of what such ‘virtue’ consists.

Sometimes this can be a matter of an explicit set of common values, as in the public of animal rights activists. Sometimes it consists in a looser and less articulate ethical disposition, as when Apple users somehow feel that their favoured brand is superior to others, in a moral sense, without them being able, perhaps, to explain exactly how. Sometimes this *ethos* can be materialized in explicit codes of conduct, as when a branded corporate organization seeks to make certain values transpire all through its value chain, or when members of a brand community put up explicit standards for judging other members’ conduct (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Sometimes the *ethos* contains a strong aversion to clearly identified enemies and prescribe strong expectations about the lifestyle of members, as when members of Free Software publics are expected to resent proprietary software and have nothing to do with Microsoft.

In any case, the *ethos* that keeps a public together, and installs communality in the absence of community also generally contains a set of standards and expectations that allow members of that public to make judgements as to the value of the conduct and character of other members, or other publics. Again, such expectations can be strong or weak, implicit or explicit. Publics of Free Software developers have strong expectations as to the conduct of their members which are rendered explicit in manifestos, constitutions and other textual products where values are directly spelled out. Corporate brands prosper as long as the explicit value statements that they set for themselves are mirrored in the judgments that their stakeholders make as to their actual practice. Brand ‘communities’ have weaker expectations that are sometimes never spelled out – but try coming to a Harley Davidson reunion on your Japanese motorcycle!

The existence of an *ethos* in this second sense of ‘custom’ means that publics have values. As such, they are able to confer value judgements on the conduct of

their members (as well as on the conduct of other actors). A growing literature on brand communities, urban creative scenes and Free or Open production networks shows that members are acutely aware of the virtues and vices of the conduct of other members, and quite quick to make their judgements known (for an overview see Arvidsson & Peitersen, 2013). What is judged is generally not only or even primarily technical competence. Even in highly specialized publics, like those of Open Source software developers, people are judged not only for their ability to write 'beautiful code' but also for their ability to solve conflicts, socialize new members, and contribute to the cause of the public in general. Such non-technical judgments are even more important in publics that require less in terms of technical brilliance, like brand communities or publics of people devoted to a common erotic kink, where the conduct and virtue of individual members often becomes the main determinant of their standing in the eyes of others. Indeed, in an early study Don Slater showed that 'sex pic traders on IRC' – a by now presumably defunct breed – maintained what he called a 'moral economy' in which they constantly judged the conduct of each other both in terms of their propensity to 'leech', and in terms of the tone of discussion that individual members engaged in (Slater, 1998). Generally, such judgments are conferred on individual members as reputation. Indeed, throughout the history of modern philosophy reputation has always been understood as part of a person's public existence, of his existence as a member of a public (Brennan and Pettit, 2004). As such, public reputation has a number of particular characteristics.

First, as opposed to trust, reputation does not presuppose the intimacy of interaction. On the contrary, reputation can be conferred on strangers on the basis of limited public information about their behaviour and character. We do not need to know Jamie Oliver to know he is someone who can not only cook, but is also socially-engaged in virtuous ways. Excessive intimacy can often destroy a person's reputation, as when a politician's love life is inappropriately exposed. Reputation is the form that social capital takes among strangers.

Second, a person's reputation is an abstraction of a multitude of value judgments conferred on him or her by a large number of actors who may depart from diverse value judgements. Once again, the reputation of Jamie Oliver presumably depends on judgements as to his conduct and virtue performed by people who are meat-eaters as well as vegans. This means that publics possess some mechanism that is able to abstract the concrete value judgements that particular members express, and transform these into comparable expressions of a common 'substance' or 'general equivalent' that expresses the comprehensive judgement of the public itself. In Bourdieuan terms, the field has its own 'laws' of value (or distinction) that enable the conversion of concrete value judgements

into standards that have general validity. For Bourdieu (1979), these mechanisms remained hidden and mysterious, to be reconstructed through minute empirical research. In many publics, at least those which use online media, they can be spelled out quite explicitly in the form of the algorithms that underpin value metrics used by, for example, publics of software developers.

Third, insofar as reputation builds not only on technical brilliance, but also on the comprehensive contribution that a member is able to give to the cause of a public, then his or her reputation represents an abstraction of the collective judgement as to the value of his or her overall contribution to the common pursuit to which the public is devoted. In this way, reputation is the abstract form that value takes in an economy of commons.

Once a person has acquired a reputation, this can be realized in different ways. First, in creative scenes, reputation is often directly monetized. It is the reputational status of an actor that largely determines the monetary value of his work. This is true for artists, musicians and DJs, as well as, increasingly, freelance knowledge workers and mobile corporate managers (Currid, 2007; Martin, 2005). Second, reputation can be used as social capital. The higher a person's reputation, the easier it is for him or her to initiate processes, recruit talented co-workers, or start new projects. Finally, reputation can enhance the enjoyment of participation. If one is conceived of as a cool guy it is more fun to go to the Star Trek fair. However reputation is realized, the prospect of accumulating reputation constitutes a motivation for participation in productive publics. Whatever my other reasons for participating are, the fact I can acquire a reputation that I can subsequently enjoy in many different ways makes participation in productive publics quite compatible with classic notions of economic rationality. In other words, if we think of productive consumption as happening in publics, we can also find a way to explain why people participate in such practices that is perfectly in line with established models of economic action.

The notion that productive publics in general are coordinated by a new kind of reputation economy is presently being consolidated by a wide range of empirical studies that analyze highly diverse practices. In addition, actual developments that point towards the objectification of reputation and the integration of such objectified measurements in a number of value decisions – on the micro as well as macro level – point towards the possibility that such a reputation economy is presently undergoing a process of rationalization. For example, many recent qualitative studies point to how knowledge workers consistently cultivate an online reputation to enhance the monetary value of their work and further their careers more generally (Hearn, 2008; Clegg, 2011), and often use objective

measurements of such reputational capital, like Klout status, in order to justify the fees that they charge (Marwick, et al., 2010). It should be noted that most of the empirical evidence derives from more 'professional' contexts, like urban creative scenes (Currid, 2007), publics of freelance workers (Clegg, 2011) or open source developers (O'Neil, 2009).

It seems reasonable to suggest that as productive consumption enters into a normal part of the life conduct of knowledge workers, and in particular for the younger generations of future knowledge workers who are now the most passionate self-branders on social media platforms (Marwick and Boyd, 2010), a reputation for excellence in such practices of productive consumption becomes part of the social capital that knowledge workers (and others too, perhaps) can deploy. To put it in Bourdieuan terms: insofar as 'distinction' comes to depend not primarily on the ability to replicate established consumption norms, but on the ability to consume productively and 'creatively' (Brooks, 2001), and insofar as consumption as such counts ever more as a field in which overall character is defined, it is reasonable to expect that reputation acquired through participation in productive consumer publics becomes all the more significant in the 'general economy of capital' in which social resources and opportunities are distributed. What is new is not that reputation per se becomes important to economic success. This mechanism has already been identified by sociologists like Weber (1948), Parsons (1939) and Bourdieu (1979). Rather, what is new is that the field in which such reputation is acquired shifts from the religious 'sect' or the profession to the productive consumer public. Consequently, participation in such productive consumer publics becomes in part motivated by the ability to accumulate reputational capital that can be realized in other walks of life.

Action and ethics

Until quite recently, the relation between consumption and ethics has been conceived in largely two ways. First there is the liberal view that suggests that consumers express their exogenous preferences, including ethical preferences, via their consumer choices. In this sense, consumption is understood as one way among many others in which values can be expressed, one of many 'voice' options that modern citizens can chose from. The values actually expressed here are understood to originate from the private concerns of individuals. Second, there is the critical theory perspective, whereby consumption and consumer society is understood to be diametrically opposed to the very possibility of ethics. This view is perhaps best expressed by Zygmunt Bauman, who in his lecture entitled 'Does ethics have a chance in a world of consumers?' responded with a

distinct 'no'. This is because, in a consumer society, the sense of communality necessary for ethics to thrive

has been split into a multitude of individual and personal, strikingly similar but decidedly not complementary portmanteaus. Each one is made to the measure of consumers' bliss – meant, like all consumer joys, for utterly individual, lonely enjoyment even when relished in company'. (2008: 28)

But the phenomenon of consumer publics seems to indicate another possibility, in line with recent empirical research on ethical or socially responsible consumer practices (Barnett et al. 2005; Devinney et al., 2010; Marres, 2011): that consumer action can actually work as a source of ethics, and not just as a reflection (or negation) of ethical perspectives that have emerged elsewhere.

Such a different conception of ethics also builds on a different conception of consumer practice. Once again, consumption has traditionally been conceived of as a passive activity, the 'end' of the production process in which values are destroyed, unfolding in a 'consumer's society' where human life has been incarcerated in an iron cage made up of administered and mass-produced needs (Arendt, 1958: 126-135). In response to the growing activity of consumers and the increasing inclusion of that activity within the capitalist valorization process, some recent social theory has instead suggested that the activity of consumption be subsumed under the term 'labour' (Arvidsson, 2006; Fuchs, 2010). I think this operation is misleading for, principally, two reasons. First, from an economic point of view, the ways in which consumer practice adds value to capital are different from those traditionally associated with the ability of labour to create surplus value in the capitalist economy (Arvidsson and Colleoni, 2011). Second, and more important for our purposes, the experience of productive consumption is different from that classically associated with labour.

To put it in Arendt's terms: the labour of the slave or of the industrial worker is different from the 'work' of the craftsman in that it is alienated from the end product and only obeys the imposed orders and directions of someone else (i.e. the capitalist, the *pater familias*). Labour is thus a human productive activity that is alienated and commanded (Arendt, 1958: 79; Sennett, 2008). But the productive activity of consumers is neither alienated nor is it commanded. It is undertaken freely out of 'passion for' (or 'affective proximity' to) the cause to which it is dedicated. In this way the activity of consumers is more similar to what Arendt calls 'action'; that is, the creative activities that are freely undertaken by actors in the public domain. Action is immediately related to ethics in the sense that, through it, human beings create a common world (a *polis*) that enables them to live together.

Consumers who come together in publics act together to form common horizon of values that, in turn, determine the direction of their passions and engagements. And those common value horizons, those *ethoi*, last as long as they are, in turn, able to involve and render passionate new and existing actors. This is true for traditional brand ‘communities’, in the face of which brand managers perceive that they are losing the power to determine what the ‘values’ of a brand should be, and it is also true in relation to the increasingly well documented power of looser forms of public opinion to set the values that are attributed to consumer brands and that determine perceptions of corporate social responsibility. Moreover, it is true for more ‘political’ consumer publics like the San Francisco-based ‘plastic pollution coalition’, a public consisting of a range of diverse actors, some consumers, some NGOs, some companies, who together to invent and create a new moral and political point of view from which to criticize and act on the problem of plastic ocean pollution (see <http://plasticpollutioncoalition.org/>) In this sense, it seems that consumer publics could act as the ‘value communities’ that modern moral philosophers, starting with Alastair MacIntyre (1981), have understood to be disappearing in modern society, taking with them the very possibility of a coherent discourse on ethics.

What is more, the ethics of consumer publics entails the coming together of a multitude of points of view, representing the multitude of orders of worth (Stark, 2009) that prevail in contemporary society, and their fusion into one – however temporary – value construct that enable a value judgement to take place, however momentarily. In this way, publics might offer a solution to the crippling relativism that plagues ‘post-modern ethics’ (Bauman, 1993; Badiou, 2001). At the same time, however, the universal that publics arrive at is not metaphysically grounded, nor even ‘transcendent’ in any way (not even ‘quasi-transcendent’, Habermas, 1984; 1987). It is rather a mobile, temporary universal, which just like the universal of market prices represents nothing but the dynamics of the new objectified sentiment (or ‘General Sentiment’, Arvidsson, 2011) that can be abstracted from the many minute value judgements that members of singular publics engage in. In this way, networked consumer publics can potentially offer a new conception of value by means of which the worth of action might be judged.

Consumer publics are also political spaces, or at least they might represent the beginning of a new politics concerned with the direct management of common resources. Like the communities that Elinor Ostrom (1990) studied in her *Governing the commons*, publics involve participants in a series of engagements and deliberations – frequently highly conflicting – in which members build the norms, rules, institutions and organizational forms, including definition of ends

and aims, that enable the public to keep operating productively and further the cause that it has in common. Publics are thus political in the classic Aristotelian sense of constructing and caring for the cause in common, the *polis*, but, contrary to the communities that Ostrom studied, they can do this without the requirement of physical co-presence, binding strong ties or 'hot' intimacy. This way, publics can constitute an institutional form for government of the global immaterial commons, like the 'digital commons' that are growing ever more central in the information society.

Both the ethical and the political aspects of consumer publics are directly linked to the creation of economic wealth. The creation of wealth, whether this be a free computer operating system, a strong brand identity that can be capitalized on as financial equity, or social wealth in the form of the ability of a public like the US food movement to contribute to addressing social concerns (or some combination of the three) is also immediately political in the sense that the successful pursuit of such wealth presupposes the successful deliberative administration of a common production process. Similarly, this process of wealth creation is impossible to separate from the ethical practice of creating common values that is what unites publics in the first place. Publics produce, deliberate and evaluate at the same time. Publics are thus manifestations of the directly political nature of 'immaterial labor' or 'knowledge work' that has constituted something of a common discovery of recent managerial theory on the one hand (Heckscher and Adler, 2006) and Italian post-Autonomist thought on the other (Virno, 2004). They represent a new institutional form in which the spheres of economics, ethics and politics, tragically separated in the modernization process, come together in forms of public action (Arendt, 1958). That is, publics might offer us a possible way of imagining both a new politicization of the economy and a new paradigm of value that is both ethical and economic at the same time.

Indeed, from the point of view of political economy, publics constitute a possible way of running an economy of commons. When, as Marx prophesized, the creation of value will rely more on common resources (or 'general intellect') than on the direct exploitation of labour time, then the 'law of value' will explode from within and 'exchange value will no longer be the measure of use value' (Marx, 1973: 705-707). This, Antonio Negri (1999) has suggested, will open up for the 'affective self-valorization of the multitude as the main principle according to which values are set. Publics, I suggest, are the institutional form in which this 'affective self-valorization of the multitude' might take place. The value form that they articulate is highly compatible with an economy of commons in that economic value comes to depend directly on a diffuse perception of ethical virtue, or in other words, the economic value of a person or of a public itself comes to depend directly on how its overall contribution to the commons is evaluated by a

multitude of actors that are affectively proximate to and have an interest in that commons. In this sense, publics and the 'ethical economy' (Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2013) represent a new possibility to let a wider plurality of 'voices' have a say in the elaboration of economic values (Couldry, 2010).

Possibility is, of course, a key term here, because in their present state, consumer publics remain subsumed and dominated by a media system in which power is increasingly concentrated among a select handful of actors and in which large corporations maintain disproportionate communicative power (Wu, 2011). This obviously limits the political and ethical potential of consumer publics. This condition also keeps the productive processes that unfold in consumer publics subsumed under an inadequate and empty notion of 'intangible value' that in itself can be understood as part of a neoliberal reaction to the growing socialization of production that marks the information economy (Arvidsson and Colleoni, 2012). But the empirical phenomenon of consumer publics points towards a different kind of value, one which is closer to the vitalist tradition of Tarde and Simmel than to Marx. Marxists have rightly criticized this tradition for its lack of attention to the ways in which value and its measure are politically constituted (Lukacs, 1971). I would suggest that attention to precisely such a politics of measure is of key importance in our present context: the construction and design of a new public sphere, with new kinds of devices and spaces that can enable value to emerge in a new way is, I think, a key ingredient of a progressive politics that tries to unlock the economic, political and ethical potential of productive publics in ways that point beyond the crumbling neoliberal edifice.

In 1996, Habermas suggested that since we no longer believe in the doctrine of natural law, or in legal positivism, jurisprudence could be opened up to processes of public deliberation. Analogously, today we no longer believe in the labour theory of value, we no longer believe in the rational market hypothesis and we have begun to have serious doubts about the notion of 'intangible value' as it is presently defined in business discourse. But, like Habermas, we sense that the setting of economic value could be opened up to wider forms of deliberation. I suggest that publics and the reputation economies that they enact can constitute a possible way of achieving this.

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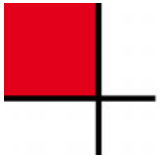
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Utopias of ethical economy: A response to Adam Arvidsson

Detlev Zwick

When sociologist Adam Arvidsson writes about marketing and consumption we should pay attention. His 2005 essay 'Brands: A critical perspective' and his 2006 book *Brands: Meaning and value in media culture* have become seminal pieces in the field I call the *critical cultural studies of marketing*, which includes scholars from a wide range of academic disciplines such as critical management studies, sociology, history, marketing, media and cultural studies (see e.g. Zwick and Cayla, 2011). By drawing on post-Marxist and autonomist theory – hitherto considered rather obscure intellectual traditions – Arvidsson has been able to provide a highly original account of how brands function in the age of post-Fordist capitalism, making him one of the most important critical theorists of brands. So naturally expectations are high when one is promised an essay by Arvidsson, especially when it was written for *ephemera*, which provides a space for truly radical contributions to management theory and practice.

In some respects the present article does not disappoint. In typical fashion, Arvidsson's writing is full of grand theoretical ambition – a trait that sets him apart pleasantly from most of the writings on consumption in academic business journals. Drawing on Hannah Arendt, Gabriel Trade and Aristotle, Arvidsson attempts to develop and elaborate a concept of a consumer public as a specific site of collaborative productive consumption, governed by a new form of rationality – what he calls 'ethical rationality' (as opposed to the rationality of neoclassical economics) – and a new type of currency or value – reputation (rather than money or exchange value) – that stems from demonstrating 'excellence of civic action' and, more generally, from the productive participation in some common endeavor.

This paper is not the first time that Arvidsson has presented his thesis that the emergence of networked communications in the 21st century has brought about a new economic rationality – what he calls an ‘ethical economy’ – driven by an ethical value standard that he derives from Aristotle's notion of *philia*, meaning friendship, affective proximity, goodwill and positive expectations (see Arvidsson, 2008; Arvidsson, 2009). This particular essay is Arvidsson's most ambitious attempt so far to bring consumption into his theory. In addition, Arvidsson attempts to sketch out the possible political implications of his view of this economic transition to an ethical and socially responsible (post-) capitalism.

Unfortunately, just when it matters most, when Arvidsson aims to establish crucial links between communicative capitalism's socio-economic transformations and new political possibilities, he abandons his previous affinity to critical theory. Hence, in my brief remarks, I will focus mainly on the ideological biases and implications of his particular theorization of the ethical economy of productive consumer publics and on the specificities of his political vision.

Participatory consumption, consumer publics and politics

Arvidsson's thesis of a fundamental transformation of consumption from a passive and unproductive activity to a participatory and productive activity, indeed a ‘new form of public action’, rests to a large degree on his reading of new media such as the Internet to bring about such practices as Open Source and Free Software movements:

that involve thousands of participants in productive practices that are more often motivated by allegiance to a particular values or a particular ethos, than by direct monetary concerns.

For Arvidsson, new media blur the boundaries between production and consumption, which leads to the diffusion of productive consumption. Consumption, Arvidsson acknowledges, has long been productive but this mode of consumption now becomes public and social in the age of the Internet. The reason why we now see so much public productive consumption is because digital media exponentially increase the production and distribution of ‘stuff’ for increased consumption of these digital goods, which then leads to more production and distribution. And on the cycle goes. Arvidsson furthermore argues that the mediatization of consumer goods and of social relations in general has greatly enhanced the ‘signifying power’ of consumer goods, meaning that brands take on much more significance today than ever before. Add to that the fact that the ‘cost of association’ has decreased significantly, ‘making it easier

for enthusiastic consumers to find each other and collaborate in the production of immaterial, as well as, increasingly, material wealth', and we have the formula in place for a world of productive public consumption.

The story that the rise of interactive media challenges the traditional boundaries of production and consumption is a familiar one, as is the suggestion that productive consumption has become a more widespread and also a social phenomenon (see e.g. Cova, Dalli and Zwick, 2011; Denegri Knott, 2004; Denegri Knott and Zwick, 2012; Kozinets, Hemetsberger, and Jensen Schau, 2008; Ritzer and Juergenson, 2010). Indeed, Arvidsson does an excellent job throughout of describing in detail how what Jodi Dean (2010) calls communicative capitalism 'works' from his perspective. He first breaks down step-by-step the key characteristics for the informational mode of productive consumption, then makes a systematic case for replacing the popular notion of community with that of 'publics' before offering an original account of what he sees as an emergent form of value, what he calls 'reputation value'. Such value is bestowed upon an individual according to a collective judgment of that individual's contribution to a rather incongruous set of collective projects (e.g. software production, conversation about a brand, organic farming, open design, etc.). Finally, Arvidsson makes the connection between his theory of public productive consumption and politics, suggesting in the process that the new collaboratively consumerist ethos of the 'networked multitude' is analogous to political practice. Echoing discernibly the cyber-libertarian narratives of Stewart Brand, Howard Rheingold and John Perry Barlow, as well as the technophilic hopes of *Wired* magazine, Arvidsson suggests that the fleeting value judgments of networked individuals offer the conditions of possibility for a more harmonious, caring and just political economy.

While fully appreciating Arvidsson's courage to argue that communicative capitalism's networked and productive consumption does not extinguish but simply reconfigures the political – including deliberation, belonging, sovereignty and concern with the common and with justice – I claim that there are a number of problems with his account of a transition to a post-capitalist society. These need to be highlighted before we can assess the potential of his theory of the consumer public and its ethos of collaborative value creation for articulating an alternative to the neoliberal ethos of economization and de-politicization (Brown, 2006; Çalışkan and Callon, 2009).

First, Arvidsson identifies a new era of collaborative production that is self-organized and autonomous. As examples he mentions the Open Source and Free Software phenomena and their extensions into other areas such as manufacturing, agriculture, design and so on. This drive towards 'open-

everything' represents for Arvidsson the dawn of a new modality of value creation that imposes itself against 'traditional' (presumably capitalist) forms of value, i.e. money or exchange value. I would submit, however, that this critique of traditional modalities of value aims at a straw man: post-Fordist capitalism has long incorporated concepts of worker self-organization and collaborative production into its regime of accumulation (Kumar, 1995; Thrift, 2005). Arvidsson does recognize this, citing management texts that describe how the discourse of employee self-organization, empowerment and freedom has transformed work inside capitalist firms over the last 30 years. Thus, Arvidsson's point here does *not* seem to be that an economy based on collaboration, self-organization and reputation value needs to be juxtaposed against a stifling corporate bureaucratic form of monopoly capitalism. Rather, he seems to imply that to move towards a more inclusive and just economic organization, what is needed is the expansion of the collaborative ethos already employed successfully to everyone and everything by the best of breed, namely, post-Fordist capitalists.

In other words, for Arvidsson the opponent is not post-Fordist capitalism and its often cynical appropriation of social productivity and collective creativity. Indeed, he seems to advocate a universalizing of the values on which the success of contemporary communicative capitalism is based, including notions of individual empowerment, information sharing and networked collaboration (Dean, 2010). Rather, his opponents are institutions – corporations, the state and so on – that aim at restricting the ability of individual networkers to generate, access and share the information they need to devise new, freer and more fulfilled modes of being.

Conceptually, Arvidsson uses consumption as a way to universalize the collaborative ethos of communicative capitalism. By making the shift from collaborative production to what he then calls 'productive consumer practices' – mainly through the notion of immaterial labor – he embarks on his journey to sketch out a theory of consumption as public action. This is based on the idea that if consumption can be seen as productive, then we are no longer just looking at production as confined to formal organizations but as diffused across the vast global information network, encompassing in its sphere anyone equipped with a computer. Arvidsson considers a wide range of practices as productive consumption, from creating personal identities to collaborating on Open Source software projects to tweeting about Apple products. Indeed, how far-reaching productive consumption is becomes clearer during his discussion of the forms of value created by consumers.

Drawing on Tarde, Arvidsson suggests that almost anything we do as modern consumers becomes productive in some fashion, largely because it can be recast

as communication. Up to this point, I agree with his assessment. Similar observations about the productive aspect of consumption have been made in different ways and contexts (e.g. Frank, 1998; Heath and Potter, 2004; Smythe, 1981/2006). However, I part ways with Arvidsson when he claims that much, if not most, of this self-organized and autonomous work done by consumers in some form of loose association takes place outside the domain of markets, property relations and corporate hierarchies. He makes this claim by proposing two distinct domains of value circulation, one traditional (based on money currency) and one ethical (based on reputation currency), without clarifying the relationship between the two domains and the nature of the value circulating in the ethical one.

It is through this distinction that Arvidsson's description of life and work in post-capitalism – that is, of productive consumption – conjures up images of countercultural bliss, rejecting centralized-hierarchical, planned and top-down capitalism for the decentralized, emergent and bottom-up world of cognitive/communicative capitalism. In this world, the computer-literate give and take freely from a common repository of information and knowledge, no one claims property rights and individual self-reliance combined with a collaborative ethos frees these 'digeratis' from the dependence on corporate provisions. What is more, money matters not in this economy. Indeed, it is the somewhat implicit claim that the reason that these publics 'work' is exactly because money has been replaced by a different kind of currency: individual reputation, or the more diffuse concept of 'civic excellence'.

At this juncture, his discussion of value creation in these consumer publics¹ ties back directly to the libertarian fantasies of the New Communalists and their vision of life, which 'combined nomadic tribes and high-tech electronics in a frontier fantasy of do-it-yourself freedom' (Dean, 2010: 20; see also Turner, 2006). Arvidsson combines notions of individual consciousness, affective intensity, and self-organizing systems to describe a world of harmonious and collaborative information workers passionately vying for reputational status. Nonetheless, an economy of sorts – what I would call 'libertarian commonism' – almost entirely disavows its position within a capitalist economy and conceals the economic dependence of the members of these consuming-producing publics on the market. What, for example, about the aspiring graphic designer in Toronto

1 I shall emphasize that I agree with his rejection of the wide-spread use of the term 'community' to describe almost any kind of association of networked individuals, no matter how transient and loosely allied. I differ, however, with regard to his assessment of their political potential.

whose already precarious economic situation is being threatened further by the emerging global competition from designers in low-wage countries, allowing the Canadian entrepreneur looking for a cool new logo for his nascent company to take advantage of ‘the reduced cost of association’ to conduct his own version of labor cost arbitrage? As one of my students recently told me, he was able to save between 80% and 90% of the cost for the logo design by replacing a local designer with one in the Philippines².

Or consider the field of ‘game modding’, an activity in which players of games create their own modifications to the game – a great example of Arvidsson’s ethical or reputation economy. Modders compete fiercely for peer recognition and social capital (Banks, 2010). But in this communal world of productive consumption, the lines between amateurs and professionals are very thinly drawn. Kushner (2002), for example, relates the story of how John Carmack and John Romero – the developers of the first popular moddable game *DOOM* – became professional developers by first distinguishing themselves as amateur game-makers. Indeed, id Software, the company that produces *DOOM*, makes a conspicuous point of the fact that it ‘discovered many of their current employees and development partners based on mods that were created and distributed over the Internet’ (id Software, 2013)³.

These examples from the reputation-based world of game development – and many others could be added from such fields as general software code writing, hacking, creative design, fashion design and so on – underscore how the collective productive work of the players themselves is often recognized as a valid and important avenue for acquiring jobs in the industry (Au, 2002). As Sotamaa (2010) points out, stories of modders-turned-developers circulate routinely in modding communities, creating an awareness among modders that a strong reputation gained as an amateur developer may be converted into paid employment. For a company seeking top talent, nothing would be more sensible than to scour modding communities for high performers, turning the fierce competition among modders for a reputation as a top-notch creative into a proxy job interview. We should note the ease with which the mod, an emblematic product of Arvidsson’s ethical economy, is recast as a résumé building-block and integrated into the circuits of competitive communicative capitalism.

Interestingly, Arvidsson is quite aware of the affinity between competitive market capitalism and his model of an ethical economy that is based on reputation

2 See <http://99designs.com>.

3 See Hong, R., & V. H.-H. Chen (forthcoming) *Becoming an ideal co-creator: Web materiality and intensive laboring practices in game modding*. New Media & Society.

capital, even as he pushes aside the competitive imperative of capitalism to make his political point. He states:

This [the creative collaborative production of software, brand use, fan fiction, and so on] has led many observers, coming from widely different perspective to suggest that such collaborative practices are the harbingers of a new altruistic mode of production where monetary rewards, and by implication traditional conceptions of economic rationality no longer apply...I believe that this is something of a premature conclusion. It is definitely possible to reconstruct an economic rationality around participation in practices of collaborative production. But it is a different rationality than that proposed by neoclassical economics. I will suggest that it is better understood as a civic, or ethical rationality, where motives of economic gain and motives that have to do with the excellence of civic action tend to coincide, or at least approach one another.

Here, then, we arrive at the crux of Arvidsson's theory of a political economy of the ethical: it is about changing the currency of competitive consumer capitalism but not the game itself. In fact, by presuming that the work of productive consumer publics is analogous to politics – with its concern for justice, the common, deliberation, sovereignty and so on – Arvidsson avoids conflict and political struggle over how to govern ourselves. In his conception of the reputation economy as a path towards a new form of government (via the political decisions of loosely associated consumer publics), Arvidsson acts as if the market and the government were the same thing. His intention may be different, since he imagines a multitude of empowered and networked individuals to draw on and contribute to some sort of common resource. But importantly, the commons of his world are constructed through an imperative of entrepreneurial competitiveness in which individual knowledge workers play all kinds of collaborative games to accrue whatever currency is at stake.

Once we reinsert the economic context in which these activities of collaboration take place, it becomes clear that the reputation economy merely extends the neoliberal logic of competition and the concomitant production of few winners and many losers to all participants, even to the production and consumption of common resources. In short, the reputation economy posits that every knowledge producer-consumer become an entrepreneur of himself. Here, the person who wins will be the most adept at appropriating common resources for the creation of innovative and ultimately individual contributions that can at some point be privatized as profit or salary. From a political perspective, then, the notion of the 'circulation of common' – which, it should be added, has a rather different meaning in Dyer-Witheford's essay of the same name (2009) – forecloses the possibility of an extended and committed concern for the public good and replaces it with a market-driven allocation of fleeting private interest

and temporary affective attachments that can always be withdrawn and reallocated as required by market demand.

Politics for Arvidsson, then, becomes a private consumerist matter even as the product of these private activities is what Kelty (2008) calls a 'recursive public'. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that Arvidsson cites Kelty approvingly and draws extensively on this concept to sketch out his notion of consumer publics. This is so because Kelty represents the extreme view of cyber-libertarian anti-government market anarchism in which the entrepreneurs of communicative capitalism govern the rest of us, almost literally merging markets and governance (see Dean 2010 for a critique of Kelty). More to the point, Kelty's recursive publics – a concept, by the way, based on the sole example of Free Software – represent a vision of politics in which the *demos* has been replaced by a technocratic elite whose collaborative, creative and affective work is posited as the appropriate site of political determination. These publics, just like Arvidsson's, may be political but, being neither authorized nor legitimated, they most definitely are not democratic – a point I will return to below.

It is at this juncture of Arvidsson's argument that we need to turn our attention to what I consider a possibility of redemption for his economic and political vision: the nature of labour in consumer publics. Arvidsson is quite aware, it seems to me, that his account of an economy of collaborative ethos and reputation capital has the potential to reproduce the same extremes of inequality and can be just as exploitative as any other regime of capitalism. After all, in communicative capitalism's competitive games for reputation, we have to imagine a winner-takes-almost-all outcome as expressed by the proclivity to rank individuals by score (that is the constant peer ranking usually accompanied by a score of some kind, such as an '89% approval' on Ebay), rendering reputation a relative measure and, hence, scarce (we cannot all be number one!).

So what could make this ethical economy somehow more palatable than your generic capitalist one? What could make it, to use Arvidsson's words, post-capitalist? His answer to this conundrum is that labour in an economy characterized by self-organization, collective experimentation and individual empowerment is undertaken 'freely and out of passion'. In other words, work by knowledge workers in consumer publics has nothing in common with the alienated and directed form of labour found in the kind of corporate-industrial capitalism consumer publics apparently reject.

As the previous paragraphs should have made clear, I claim that Arvidsson's assessment of the nature of labour in the consumer publics is too naïve to be convincing. I hold his disavowal of the underlying political economy of

knowledge work responsible for his fall into the ideological trap of equating techno-utopian entrepreneurialism with freedom and voluntarism of work. One does not have to be a Marxist to see how hollow such a claim sounds at a time when millions of knowledge and creative workers are forced into precarious work relations and insecure self-employment as the only chance of making a living. From the analysis offered above, the productive consumption work described by Arvidsson represents little more than a continuation (if not a radicalization) of what Lazzarato (2009) calls 'neoliberalism in action', a decades-old project of progressive individualization and precarization of labour, an entrepreneurialization of society and a universalization of the logic of competition. In Arvidsson's economic world, there is a need for an admiring and evaluating public – the market for individual contributions, if you like – and there is also a need for a 'substance' or affect, to be exploited to create value (be this the body for the self-exploiting worker or the common-creative resources of the consumer public [knowledge, styles, ideas, etc.] for the modern digital entrepreneur, i.e. the productive consumer self as reputation manager).

One's economic value, therefore, depends on one's ability to appeal to a market of 'collective judgment'. We may call this collective judgment 'the common', but how Arvidsson's notion of the common, when boiled down to this particular essence, is any different in principle from 'the market' is not very clear. Indeed, it seems that the underlying logic of accruing economic worth in and from 'the commons' is no different in practice and in its governmental effects on the performing subject (*qua* competitive entrepreneurial experimentation) than that of neoliberal capitalism, regardless of the nature of the currency. Can we really speak of un-alienated and non-exploitative work when what is at stake now is the competition for reputation as the abstraction of the value of individual creative labour? This is especially so because reputation capital allows the holder to marshal a following across other domains, *qua* improved 'personal brand equity', which can then, hopefully, be turned into economic capital (there is, as the author points out, a Bourdieudian element to all of this). Apparently alienation in communicative capitalism takes a different shape. Indeed it is tempting to imagine a world of 'alienation 2.0'⁴ in which 'free and passionate' knowledge workers find that the separation of labour and its fruits re-enter their lives when reputation acquires exchange value in the money economy.

In the final analysis, and returning to the implications of his version of communicative capitalism for an emancipatory political project, Arvidsson promotes an anti-corporate and anti-governmental picture of consumer capitalism, where the networked consumer-entrepreneur wrestles away power

4 I thank Yesim Ozalp for providing me with this term.

from companies over the determination of what is being produced, where and by whom. Based on his cyber-libertarian approach to the emerging networked commons and a disavowal of its underlying political economy, Arvidsson elevates democratic ideals of information access, inclusion, discussion and participation to a stand-in for democratic politics *tout court*. This to me represents the extrapolation of the familiar neoliberal story of the strange convergence between democracy and capitalism by uncritically situating political action in the global communication network.

But not everyone can become a reputation entrepreneur and not everyone who becomes one can win the experimental game of reputation creation. Perhaps more urgently than critiquing the ethical economy's inherent characteristics of inequality and competition, we must ask with Dean (2010: 24): What makes the productive consumption job – whether voluntary, freelance or corporate – the activities of a *demos*? To whom are these collaborative producers accountable? Who oversees *them*? Who determines whether what they've produced is good, right or legitimate? What if non-networked non-creatives want to participate? Or, what if they understand their creative, productive and affective work as the proper field of political determination?

I do not think Arvidsson's conception of a political economy has satisfying answers to these questions. He clearly betrays a lack of a more radical aspiration for wider wealth redistribution. All that is on offer from his point of view is a slight widening of the base of political participation, stating: 'In this sense, publics and the "ethical economy"...represent a new possibility to let a wider plurality of "voices" have a say in the elaboration of economic values'. The commons Arvidsson speaks of may be political but it is neither democratic nor necessarily anti-capitalist. Rather, Arvidsson's consuming publics have a lot more in common with Kelty's recursive publics than with Dyer-Witheford's (2009) notion of a circulation of the commons and the possibility for a collectively determined (bio) commonism. The notion of the commons marshalled by Arvidsson shows the weakness of an otherwise promising concept. As Dyer-Witheford (2010) points out:

Commons covers a variety of proposals for collective management of various resources, some radical, and some reformist. The commonness of commons discourse, the fact that it could be shared by activists of different stripes, was useful for movement of movements whose strength was its diversity.

This strength is also a weakness because the diversity of movements gathered around the notion of the commons produces a vagueness around what it really means. Is the movement of movements anti-corporate, or anti-capitalist? If it is anti-capitalist, what is its vision of post-capitalism? As Dyer-Witheford (2010)

explains: 'This vagueness afflicted the notion of commons'. Dyer-Witheford here builds on how George Caffentzis had previously suggested that neoliberal capital, when it confronts the mounting debacle of free market policies, could turn to a 'Plan B', in which limited versions of a commons (such as pollution trading schemes, community development and open-source and file sharing practices) are introduced as subordinate aspects of a capitalist economy where voluntary cooperation subsidizes profit. One can think here of how Web 2.0 re-appropriates many of the innovations of radical digital activists and converts them into a source of rent. There are, again, historical parallels. In romantic accounts of the historical commons it is often forgotten that commons were a supplement to a fiercely coercive feudalism; contemporary commons have the potential to be no more than a marginal, and useful add-on to global capital (see full dialogue in Dyer-Witheford 2010).

It seems to me that Arvidsson's vision of the commons of communicative capitalism realizes Dyer-Witheford and Caffentzis's fears of the radicalization, rather than the abolition (or, at a minimum, profound transformation), of neoliberal capitalism. Only by ignoring the existence of capital relations could one believe that the mode of production and value creation of the consumer publics leads to some kind of equal, sovereign, just and collective management of the commons. The political economy the author describes cannot but lead to the same enclosures of the networked, communicative consumer commons that capital performs routinely with other forms of commons.

Conclusion

To his credit, Arvidsson does admit that '[T]his article is a highly speculative piece [that] seeks to envision what a theory could look like'. Yet this is also precisely why one may be disappointed with the theoretical vision that is being suggested. When dissected into its inner workings, his particular vision of an economy based on a collaborative ethos aligns rather well with the dominant narrative of a neoliberalization of everyday life. However it seems that Arvidsson could well have imagined a more radical form of collective consumption and production – a consumer commonism, perhaps, with an unabashed disavowal of concepts such as private property, market competitiveness, and individualized entrepreneurialism that are central to contemporary forms of neoliberal capitalism.

Keeping more closely with Dyer-Witheford's notion of the commons, we could imagine a commonism of productive consumption as collaborative sharing in the absence of private property. This would be combined with an inclusive model of

political determination, collective sovereignty, belonging, and justice, that treats the networked publics of brand lovers, software geeks, fashion designers, real estate aficionados and so on as part of the problem, not the solution. Like Arvidsson's consumer publics, Dyer-Witheford's commonism proposes a form of social organization that is based on a collaborative ethos of the commons, except Dyer-Witheford rejects any possibility of commodification. But what else is the idea of reputation than a round-about way of commodifying creativity, a re-enclosure of the commons?

In an economy of the commons, the economic is governed by the political and not the other way around, as Arvidsson has it. In his essay in *Capital and Class*, Arvidsson (2009: 15) claims that pursuing a 'circulation of commons' of non-proprietary resources – that is, a humanity evolving from a civilization based on exchange to one based on 'contribution' – amounts to an unhelpful utopianism. We should be more pragmatic about what can be achieved. I would suggest, however, that nothing is more utopian than to expect the reputation economy of communicative capitalism to offer anything other than the continuation of growing economic inequality and the intensification of social injustice characteristic of extreme neoliberalism. There is nothing post-capitalist about it.

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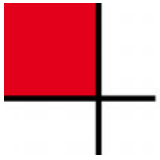
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Thinking beyond neo-liberalism: A response to Detlev Zwick

Adam Arvidsson

To do critical theory used to be fairly straightforward. The existing order of things – Global Capitalism, Consumer Society, Late Capitalism or State Monopoly Capitalism – could be criticized for its shortcomings in relation to an actually existing alternative. This alternative did not have to be fully realized to exist. It was enough that the ideas that it embodied (socialism, free love, authentic human relationships) moved the imaginations of a multitude of people for the alternative to be real (at least in the Hegelian sense of that term). To the people that it moved, this alternative seemed to have a realistic potential of actually changing the order of things. It derived this realistic potential from being supported by what Hegelians would call a historical subject, the working class, a vibrant civil society, the dense associational network that made up the counterculture, the New Social Movements where alternative forms of life could be tried out in practice, and in the end, actually existing socialism as an economic and, not to forget, military power¹.

Today this realistic alternative no longer exists: actually existing socialism has become insignificant as a geopolitical player. More importantly, thirty years of neoliberal governance, together with the transition to a new global information-intensive regime of capitalist accumulation – ‘communicative capitalism’

¹ Maybe I am completely wrong here. After all, the scholarly reader could well make the argument that critical theory was born precisely out of the loss of a realistic alternative. It was only when the left understood that *it could not win* that it opened up to the likes of Horkheimer and Adorno. But Marcuse’s popularity on American university campuses in the 1960s rested to no small degree on the fact that you could actually experience what it felt like to escape ‘repressive desublimation’ while sharing a joint at the love-in.

perhaps – has effectively dismantled what was left of the structure and subjectivities that supported this alternative vision. Traditional working class politics is dead, and the working class itself has been recomposed beyond recognition; people supposedly ‘bowl alone’ and the counter culture has been more or less entirely absorbed within consumer society. We have seen the completion of what Marx described as the process of ‘real subsumption’. Every alternative to capitalism has been included within capitalism and positioned as a potential source of value. As a consequence, life within capitalism has been depoliticized, deprived of an alternative in the name of which a practically effective critique can be mounted.

This makes it trickier to do critical theory. We can of course still criticize the actual state of things. We can point to the precarious relations that prevail among creative knowledge workers; show how exploitative and unjust conditions are intensified by the very forces that drive the globalization of communicative capitalism, like the outsourcing of design work; or lament the fact that a triumphant neoliberal regime subsumes and appropriates aspects of subjectivity and social life that we think should have been left alone. To produce such critiques remains useful intellectual work – I have done it in other contexts (Arvidsson et al., 2010; Arvidsson, 2007), as has Detlev Zwick (2008), and many others. To the extent that such critiques reach a mass audience, they can become a progressive impulse to action and reflection – as in the case of Naomi Klein’s work inspiring the ‘no global’ movement (to use an inadequate name coined by the mainstream press). But such a critique without an alternative remains unsatisfactory for at least three reasons.

First, and most superficially, since everyone else is doing it, the marginal utility of yet another piece of critical theory rapidly diminishes, as does the intellectual satisfaction that can be derived from producing it.

Second, and more seriously, the absence of a realistic alternative, or even of a historical subject in the name of which such a critique can be pronounced, risks rendering critical theory moralistic and rather toothless. We might agree with Zwick when he suggests that the outsourcing of design work from Toronto to the Philippines is somehow wrong, but it is difficult to understand exactly why this would be the case. (Why shouldn’t Philippine designers be allowed to compete with Canadian designers? Can the ‘creative class’ claim an exemption from the global economy? Perhaps the answer is ‘yes’, but I do not know of any viable alternative vision of society that is able to substantiate that ‘yes’.)

Third, and most importantly, in the absence of an alternative vision, critical theory remains rather unconvincing to the people in the name of whom it

proposes to speak. I can assure you – and I’ve tried! – that you won’t become an organic intellectual among social entrepreneurs or precarious creative workers by telling them that they are exploited, that they sell out their subjectivity, or that the system in which they operate is unjust. Pure critique is simply not attractive enough to make the multitude of new productive subjects, fragmented by neoliberalism, cohere into a historical subject. To do that you need at least the myth of an alternative, as agitators from Sorel via Lenin to Subcomandante Marcos could tell you.

Don’t get me wrong. I am not proposing that it is wrong to point to the precarious conditions of knowledge work, or that we should not do this as academics and researchers. This is still an important task. But it is not enough. Critical theory must do this, but it must also do more. It must also engage with the question of what a realistic alternative to neoliberalism could be, and it must elaborate a realistic political vision in the name of which a critique that is productive and progressive, and not simply moralistic, can be articulated.

By realistic, I mean that such an alternative must be sought in the actual relations of production that characterize the contemporary information economy. Zwick’s suggestion that we

imagine a commonism of productive consumption as collaborative sharing in the absence of private property and combined with an inclusive model of political determination, collective sovereignty, belonging and justice

– and so on – is simply unproductive to my mind. We might all agree that an economy of commons that has done away with capitalism might be more desirable, but the reality is that hybrid forms, like the game modders that Zwick cites, where an economy of commons co-exists with a capitalist value logic, in some form, are indeed becoming the norm. At that point the interesting thing to do is not so much to criticize the enduring capitalist nature of these hybrid forms, but rather to investigate the new forms of politics that they might give rise to. This in no way implies that one does away with conflict and politics. Rather, it implies investigating and understanding the new spaces and discourses through which such a new type of politics can be articulated.

In order to do this we must start with what the actors involved in these processes actually think themselves. It is quite useless to simply deploy existing philosophical perspectives, or to compare the reality of communicative capitalism to utopian projections of the political visions of last century. Instead we must start with the ‘empirical metaphysics’, to use Bruno Latour’s term, that actually prevail among people engaged in such hybrid practices. We might all want to do away with neoliberalism and the forms of life that it has promoted. But at the

same time, we all recognize that the neoliberal project has been one of the most successful projects of governmentality since, perhaps, the very project of disciplinary power that Foucault himself described. *Rebus sic stantibus* we cannot simply wish it away.

We need to recognize that people have changed, that competitive individualism, self-branding and an entrepreneurial mentality are, by now, normal features of life. The same thing goes for the popular political myths that prevail among advanced knowledge workers, what Zwick calls 'cyber-utopianism'. We need to recognize that notions like peer-to-peer production, high-tech gift economies and the like have the power to mobilize the energies of the subjects that are most likely to become the pioneers of a new political vision – today's version of the skilled workers that have taken the lead in most modern political movements. Even though the social theory that they produce might be shallow and imperfect, and even though they might not have read Marx and Foucault as well as we have, we cannot simply dismiss this vision as a mere ideology to be replaced by our theoretically more refined ideology.

Like the relations of production that are emerging in communicative capitalism and the subjectivity of knowledge workers, these myths are part of the raw material with which the Gramscian intellectual must engage in order to articulate new understandings of common sense that are both politically progressive and intuitively attractive to the people that they are supposed to mobilize. In other words, in order to articulate an alternative, we cannot simply dismiss the reality of communicative capitalism and fall back on what remains of the political utopias of last century. We need to engage with the reality of neoliberal communicative capitalism and try to push its dialectic beyond its apolitical present state. We must investigate what the real conditions of production and imagination are and ask ourselves where they might lead. Critical theory needs to become an empirical, and not simply a philosophical, enterprise.

So how to do critical theory after real subsumption? My position is this. New relations of production are emerging. Value is being increasingly created by putting common resources to work in processes that unfold beyond the direct control of markets and hierarchies. We can call this commonism if we want, or simply an 'informational mode of production' to use a less loaded term. Today these new relations of production mainly unfold within the purview of neoliberal capitalism. Indeed, it is possible to claim that neoliberalism as a political project was to no small extent driven by the need to maintain corporate control over emerging commons-based relations of production (Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2013). However, a number of phenomena – from the success and attraction of Open Production systems to the unsustainable nature of contemporary

capitalism – suggest that these new relations of production have the potential to develop beyond neoliberalism and to drive the emergence of a new political and economic order that is endowed with new institutions.

Will this mean the end of capitalism as such? Perhaps, but probably not. I would suggest a scenario more similar to the 18th century. A new mode of production is taking shape: manufacture and industry in the 18th century, commonism and the informational mode of production today. Three hundred years ago, this process was accompanied by the construction of a new public sphere on which a new politics with its particular discourses and institutions, new spaces for political conflict and compromise, and eventually an entirely new ‘modern’ or ‘bourgeois’ civilization was built. This implies that the task for critical theory today is to intervene and engage in the construction of such a new public sphere through which emerging informational relations of production can find political articulation. Such a political articulation will no doubt be different from the politics of the 19th and 20th centuries, just like modern rational mass politics was different, in its terms as well as in its institutions, from a medieval politics of elites and occasional religiously inspired rebellions. But it is through such a political articulation that many of the injustices that mark informational labour today can be addressed.

It is only when they have found a way of thinking politically about what they are doing, and of inventing a semantics of justice that can attract people into movements and legitimize their actions, that graphic designers in Toronto, game modders, fashion workers in Milan, the Philippines, India and China can build the kinds of institutions that are able to resist and moderate the impact of the logic of capital on their lives. What will they do? Form a guild, or a *phyle* perhaps (Uguarte, 2010)? Create a minimum wage for all members who are able to maintain a minimum reputational status? De-link from the global economy and publically burn all products that are designed by foreigners? Who knows? But it is by intervening in that process of construction, and by doing our best to push it in directions that we think are progressive and desirable, that critical theory can find a new progressive role. We should stop behaving like tenured radicals and become more like the organic intellectuals of an emerging political subject.

I don’t know if my notion of ‘productive publics’ will be part of such a new critical semantics. But however that might be – together with the invaluable help of Zwick’s critical brilliance and *ephemera*’s enthusiasm in accommodating this debate – my article might have found some use-value in opening up a number of crucial questions that are almost never discussed or touched upon otherwise. This, I think, is no small achievement.

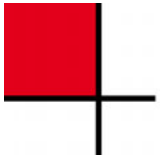
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The myth of metaphysical enclosure: A second response to Adam Arvidsson

Detlev Zwick

My initial response to Adam Arvidsson's excellent and provocative essay entitled 'The Potential of Consumer Publics,' was met by the author with a thoughtful response in which he provides, I think in very helpful ways, some clarification about the politico-ideological underpinnings of his notions of the productive consumer public and the reputation (or ethical) economy (see also Arvidsson, 2008; Arvidsson, 2009). As his defense against my charges illustrates, Arvidsson represents a position that, with Žižek, we could call 'Fukuyamaist'. This position holds that the collapse of the Communist Bloc put an end to the competition between ideological and economic systems, with the result that

liberal-democratic capitalism is accepted as the finally found formula of the best possible society; all one can do is to render it more just, tolerant and so on. The simple but pertinent question arises here: if liberal-democratic capitalism is, if not the best, then the least bad form of society, why should we not simply resign ourselves to it in a mature way, even accept it wholeheartedly? (Žižek, 2009: 52)

Is this not exactly the question Arvidsson is posing in his response? Is he not asking us to accept the reality of neoliberal capitalism and get on with it? At his Fukuyamaist best, Arvidsson suggests that to keep criticizing what cannot be changed constitutes little more than the immature trolling of utopian dreamers and tenured radicals, especially when unaccompanied by a clear description of the solution to the problem. In principle, there are two main charges leveled by Arvidsson against my critique of his argument.

First, he rejects my critique for being naïve and utopian, but he does so not because I suggest that his productive consumer publics reproduce neoliberal capitalist logic. On the contrary, Arvidsson himself seems to agree with my

assessment that his concepts of reputation economy and productive consumer publics are at the same time both product and producer of communicative capitalism. What he objects to is the anti-capitalist position from which I state my critique, because, as already mentioned above, Arvidsson has concluded that the rule of capitalism cannot be changed; it is, to put it in Žižek's terms, the real of our lives, a real so powerful that, as Fredric Jameson (2003: 73) puts it, 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism'.

Second, Arvidsson faults my response for articulating a critique without at the same time providing my own constructive vision. In other words, criticizing his neoliberal fantasies is fine as long as it is constructive, which for him means accepting his Fukuyamaist position and thus focusing one's criticism on how to make capitalism more humane and tolerable. After having been too utopian in my anti-capitalist critique, here I am not utopian enough for Arvidsson because I refuse to develop a vision of a more just, democratic, tolerant and environmentally sustainable capitalism.

Before I formulate a short response to these two charges, I would like to emphasize that as far as the assessment of Arvidsson's original argument is concerned, we actually do not have a substantial disagreement. My main claim has been that in his essay Arvidsson is advancing a conservative notion of social change that celebrates the global subsumption of digital labour as some kind of postmodern capitalist communism; an argument and vision that very much recalls Hardt & Negri's (2004) notion of the multitude as the new positive form of economic and social productivity and new radical political subjectivities. For Negri (2008), value forms created by autonomous digital collaboration and co-creation by the multitude – or as Arvidsson puts it, 'by putting common resources to work in processes that unfold beyond the direct control of markets and hierarchies' – are already just one small step removed from communism. No matter that the capitalists appropriate autonomous labour, commodify all forms of life and make the rules of the new productive game. Capitalists here are mere parasites leeching off the labour of the multitude and they can, at any moment, be cut off from the various forms of collaboration and common consumptive production, bringing about something we could 'call commonism if we want, or simply an "informational mode of production" to use a less loaded term'.

As I wrote in my earlier response, I see many problems with this theory of informational communism outside markets and hierarchies, not least being that the most convincing examples presented by Arvidsson of such an informal mode of production rely for their continuous existence and viability on markets and hierarchies. But again, the main point here is not that I believe Arvidsson's theory of the productive consumer public is inconsistent and in the final analysis

misguided and naïve¹. The main point I was trying to make in my initial response was that despite all his anti-capitalist language, Arvidsson is in actuality presenting a conservative vision of social change that takes for granted the continuation of neoliberal capitalism, albeit a version of neoliberal capitalism that over time somehow learns to accommodate and tolerate other forms of economic production and political subjectivities. In short, a neoliberalism with a human face (which is good enough for Arvidsson to move ‘beyond neoliberalism’, as if just saying it will make it so). And it turns out that Arvidsson, in his reply, admitted that much. Along similar lines, Arvidsson repeatedly states his disappointment about my refusal to

recognize that notions like peer-to-peer production, high-tech gift economies and the like have the power to mobilize the energies of the subjects that are most likely to become the pioneers of a new political vision – today’s version of the skilled workers that have taken the lead in most modern political movements. Even though the social theory that they produce might be shallow and imperfect... we cannot simply dismiss these versions as mere ideologies to be replaced by our theoretically more refined ideologies.

I can assure you that I have no difficulty recognizing the real existence of the self-branding, entrepreneurial competitor who, via skilled knowledge work, hopes to change the world. There are plenty of them in my classroom. And I am not concerned about the depth and perfection of the social theories driving their visions for the future. What I am concerned about are the processes that constitute these students as neoliberal subjectivities in the first place and subsequently limit their desire for a better world – a desire that, of course, we should encourage and not dismiss *a priori* – to variations on neoliberal capitalism (variously called social entrepreneurship, corporate social responsibility, conscious capitalism and so on).

Thus, my point was not at all to moralize about the effects of communicative capitalism but to decry two things: first, that Arvidsson elevates this neoliberal subject to be the legitimate historical subject of radical transformation, and second, that Arvidsson seems to believe that the radical transformation ushered in by this subject is one we should desire. It is one thing to acknowledge the current hegemony of neoliberal governmentality. I have no problem with that. That neoliberalism is a radical social force is plain for all to see. It is something different entirely, however, to suggest, as Arvidsson appears to, that the competitive, self-branding and entrepreneurial subject is the only possible subject we can imagine today – that this subject should be allowed to create the future world. Here, we have to become normative and demand alternatives.

¹ Although I do think that (see below).

Now that we know that Arvidsson and I in fact agree on the ideological position espoused by his theory of a productive consumer publics and the accompanying notion of the reputation economy, what about his two charges against me mentioned above? The first accusation was that my criticism of his desire to develop a theory of the social within neoliberal capitalism rather than against it was naïve and outdated. Arvidsson seems to believe that the task of a social scientist today is to be realistic, meaning to take as immutably real the fact of capitalism. There are a couple of points I would like to make about this intellectual position.

First, it is interesting to see in Arvidsson's excitement for the new digital public that for him *everything* seems possible with the Internet: the use of common resources, the formation of new public spaces and entirely new civil societies, collective forms of production across vast and complex networks of communication, truly democratic decision-making, individual empowerment, brand-building without a marketer in control, even the end of private property! And yet one thing seems impossible: the end of neoliberal capitalism. When it comes to that, we need to be 'realistic'.

Second, how naïve is my critique of capitalism really? To be sure, it certainly is not so naïve as to conjure up as our way forward the idea of 20th century communism. This idea of communism, in its state socialist form, has been soundly discredited and should be abandoned. But should we therefore give up our aspirations for a world where all social relations are not structured by capital and through commodities? Besides, there is something truly peculiar going on these days. As Indian social philosopher Saroj Giri (2010) points out, media today are full of anti-capitalist rants almost to a point where one could be forgiven for thinking that capitalism is the devil on its last legs. Stories about corrupt bankers, polluting companies, abusive labor conditions in Chinese factories and the diamond mines of Africa, corporate bribery of government officials in India and Nigeria and so on abound even in well-known bastions of capitalist propaganda such as the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Financial Times*. Capitalism's greatest cheerleaders, the *Harvard Business Review* and its publishing arm HBSP, have also been busy churning out articles and books by business scholars and consultants replete with surprisingly frank scolding of the stewards of global capitalism for being greedy and selfish, and of companies for being polluting, unfair, short-sighted, cheating and scheming and, most importantly, for putting the capitalist system at risk of imminent collapse (see e.g. Barton, 2011; Bower et al., 2011; Haque, 2011).

The important point I would like to make at this juncture is that with my critique of contemporary capitalism, I find myself firmly placed at the centre of

contemporary business discourse, not at its margins, as Arvidsson seems to believe. If there is one position today that should be characterized as naïve and utopian, it is the one that posits that the same system that brought us to the point we are at today (rapidly rising inequality and economic apartheid, rampant depolitization, environmental catastrophe and so on) can somehow fix with its left hand what its right hand destroyed. On what basis, other than utopian faith, can one make such a claim?

Obviously, Arvidsson is not the only one suggesting that capitalism can be fixed in spite of itself. It is a popular position among people across a wide political spectrum, from right-wing libertarians to several so-called leftist groups and their hopes for saving what remains of the social-democratic welfare state. What all of these supporters of capitalism – including Arvidsson – fail to explain to the rest of us is how a system designed to grow, create many more losers than winners, exploit natural resources and pollute the environment will suddenly and miraculously contain itself and create collectively shared resources, many more winners than losers and environmental health. Let's remember that Arvidsson started his rejoinder with a bit of Hegel, but when it comes to assessing the potential of capitalism as a totality, Hegel conveniently no longer features. But hasn't Žižek in particular made the point that if we are to really understand capitalism with Hegel we cannot separate the positive from its negations. The negative – Foxconn, ongoing civil war in the Congo, rising unemployment and recurring economic crises and so on – cannot be understood as aberrations of the totality of capitalism but as its constitutive parts. Therefore, anyone proposing to fix capitalism from within needs to answer the question of what kind of negativity he or she is willing to accept as part of the new and improved capitalism (how much pollution is OK, how much unemployment is OK, how much war is OK, etc.). I think it is not only justified, but today more important than ever, to ask, who here between the two of us is the radical utopian?

The second charge against my initial response was that all that criticizing is all well and good but, unless it is combined with a solution, such criticism is not constructive. A reactionary response to criticism that aims at foreclosing critical discourse, such a demand for constructiveness and practical solutions, should be rejected unconditionally. First, on moral grounds, why should it be acceptable for someone who posits as a 'solution' a utopian fantasy (hence no solution at all) to demand from his or her detractors a solution? Second, we should reject the notion that criticism should always be constructive on theoretical grounds. Constructivist criticism is a kind of criticism that accepts the coordinates of the real within which the criticized object resides. If criticism rejects the assumptions on which the critiqued rests, or put differently, if criticism rejects as

unacceptable the entire symbolic universe that make possible the criticized object, then it cannot be called constructive.

Often, then, constructive criticism becomes meaningless criticism. For example, how would one provide constructive criticism of Hitler's ideological and political project? Such a task would make little sense because it would cast *a priori* Hitler's Third Reich as a reasonable entity (see Horkheimer, 2004). Similarly, when Arvidsson calls for us to start behaving like reasonable and constructive people, what he means is that we should accept the coordinates of his argument – for example, that neoliberal capitalism has to be accepted as a reality and by doing so we can move beyond it – as a reasonable entity. Trying to change these coordinates becomes unreasonable and unconstructive.

Here again we should remember Žižek's advice to the Wall Street occupiers not to speak to all those agents of reason, those pragmatists, from Clinton to Obama to Goldman Sachs. At such moments of resistance and defiance, silence becomes the most radical act against pragmatic politics, the kind of politics that wants to resolve the problem step by step in a realistic way, rather than addressing it at its roots (see Žižek, 2008). Because what would Arvidsson's response be to anything outside the existing coordinates he sees structuring the domain of social and economic relations? Perhaps, then, this is not the time to articulate solutions when we are still struggling to ask the right questions. This sentiment is expressed perfectly by a joke Žižek told at Occupy Wall Street².

In an old joke from the defunct German Democratic Republic, a German worker gets a job in Siberia; aware of how all mail will be read by censors, he tells his friends: 'Let's establish a code: if a letter you will get from me is written in ordinary blue ink, it is true; if it is written in red ink, it is false'. After a month, his friends get the first letter written in blue ink: 'Everything is wonderful here: stores are full, food is abundant, apartments are large and properly heated, movie theatres show films from the West, there are many beautiful girls ready for an affair – the only thing unavailable is red ink'.

The point of the joke is that without the red ink, we lack the very language to articulate our reality. Paraphrasing Žižek, what this lack of red ink means is that all the main terms we use to designate the present situation – 'productive consumer publics', 'informal economy and freedom', 'common resources', etc. – are false terms, mystifying our perception of the situation instead of allowing us to think it. Before we offer solutions, we need the red ink.

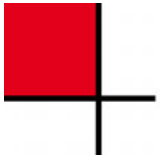
2 <http://www.imposemagazine.com/bytes/slavoj-zizek-at-occupy-wall-street-transcript>.

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On things and comrades

Olga Kravets

The light is from the East... not only the liberation of the working class. The light is from the East – in a new relation to man, to woman, and to objects. Objects in our hands should also be equal, also be comrades, and not black, gloomy slaves like they have here.

The art of the East should be nationalized and rationed out. Objects will be understood, will become people's friends and comrades, and people will begin to know how to laugh and enjoy and converse with things...

Alexander Rodchenko, May 04, 1925, Paris (cited in Lavrentiev et al., 2005: 169)

'Our things in our hands must be also equals, also comrades...' – wrote Alexander Rodchenko, a prominent figure of Russian Constructivism, in his letter from Paris in 1925. The quote is increasingly favored by many, from anti-consumerism activists and advocates for alternative economy to corporate designers and marketers. All see 're-examination of our relationships to objects' as a way to 'enhance our [consumer] lives'¹. In 1925, this was a call to construct new kinds of objects and in doing so to forge new ways of social organizing – to build a new society.

Rodchenko used the word *tovarishch* (an egalitarian revolutionary address at the time) to indicate a need for a radically different socio-political conception of objects and our relations to them. In this note, I reflect on how the

1 For an activist take on 'objects as comrades' see <http://piecesofyoutopia.com/wordpress/>, for a corporate orientation, see <http://jonhoward.typepad.com/livingbrands/2011/11/umair-haque-meaningful-brands-amplify-human-potential.html>.

Constructivists' ideas about objects played out in Soviet material culture. Soviet goods indeed acquired a somewhat different status to products in a capitalist market; however, objects as *tovarishch* never seemed to have been able to escape the *tovar* in *tovarishch*. As if standing in the way of Rodchenko's liberation mission, the etymological roots of the word *tovarishch* uphold an object-subject tension: *tovarishch* is derived from the noun *tovar*, meaning any object in exchange; a commodity, merchandise, etc. In fact, before being adopted by revolutionaries, *tovarishch* referred to 'business or trade associates'².

I am aware of the linguistic determinism implied. Nevertheless, in the subsequent discussion, I choose several meanings of *tovarishch* in Russian in order to tell a story about how Soviet goods historically hung suspended in the midair point of 'not quite a commodity'. My goal here is not to dampen the current enthusiasm for Constructivists' thoughts on objects but instead to suggest that there is much to be explored in terms of the politics of consumption in their vision of a new social world premised on a different relationship to things.

Tovarishch, n – a comrade; a common form of revolutionary address since about 1905

Russian Constructivism is an artistic movement born in the turbulent years of World War I and the Russian Revolution, and is now often defined by the utopian ideal of revolutionary art improving the everyday lives of individuals and the broader collective (Gough, 2005; Kiaer, 2005; Margolin, 1997). While Constructivism was not a homogeneous movement, its various factions shared the common belief that the role of an artist was not to document the revolution and mirror society, but to realize the revolution and lead the masses into the building of a new society (Andrews and Kalinovska, 1990). As Alexei Gan (1922, c.f. Groys, 1992: 24) declared in his 'Constructivism' manifesto:

We should not reflect, depict and interpret reality, but should build practically and express the planned objectives of the newly active working class, the proletariat...must all become Constructivists in the general business of the building and the movement of the many millioned human mass.

Accordingly, art was to be displaced into the world and put to the service of production. In the early 1920s Russia, during the 'capitalism-light' market economy of the New Economic Policy (NEP), Constructivism turned into

2 In all linguistic references, I use two authoritative sources on Russian language: Vasmer (1986) and Ozhegov and Shvedova (1992).

Production Art³. For Constructivists, participation in production extended beyond a tradition of ‘applied art’ or even ‘technological construction’ to the design of fundamentally different relations between individuals and objects (Gough, 2005). This agenda was premised on the thesis that the social consciousness and society’s world-view are influenced by both the process of making objects in production and the process of using objects in everyday life, and that the human relation to things becomes definitive of social relations. Then, a social and ideological transformation is possible through consumption (not just production), where the new socialist objects, ‘connected as coworkers with human practice’ will produce the human subjects of socialist modernity (Arvatov, 1923[1997]: 126).

In ‘Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing’ (1923[1997]), Boris Arvatov, a key theorist of Constructivism, describes what socialist objects might be like vis-à-vis the things of bourgeois culture. First, socialist objects will be liberated from the enslavement of the commodity status, from an exchange-mediated valuation. Things will be valued based on their productive qualification and use-value. Unlike commodities, socialist objects will ‘[speak] for themselves’ – not displaying socio-ideological categories but ‘laying bare their constructive essence,’ and their material forms will serve only to articulate and make visible their purpose (ibid.: 123, 126). For Arvatov, the purpose of an object included its ‘utilitarian-technical purpose’ and its socio-political utility in organizing everyday life (ibid.; Margolin, 1997).

Second, given the Constructivists’ regard for technology, socialist objects would be principally industrially mass-manufactured goods, stripped of anything that would obscure their *tselesobraznost’* (expediency) and/or prevent them from participating honestly in social processes (Kiaer, 2005: 33). They were to be dynamic, flexible, and affective, and able to adapt instantly to the needs of social practice (Arvatov, 1923[1997]: 126). Through these qualities, socialist objects would assist in developing, amplifying and enriching humans’ sensory, physical, and mental capacities. As such, they would differ from ‘completed, fixed, static, and consequently, dead’ capitalist commodities that alienate human senses, sedate consciousness and isolate people from nature (ibid.: 122).

Third, active socialist objects would shape both physical and psychological regimens of culture. As Alexander Vesnin (1922, c.f. Andrews and Kalinovska, 1990: 68) stated:

3 The New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1921-1928 legalized market for agricultural produce and goods manufactured in small-scale private enterprises; this temporary policy aimed to deal with chronic product shortages and revive the post Civil War devastated economy.

Each particular object created by the contemporary artist must enter life as an active force that organizes the consciousness of human beings, acting both psychologically and physiologically, and prompting energetic activity.

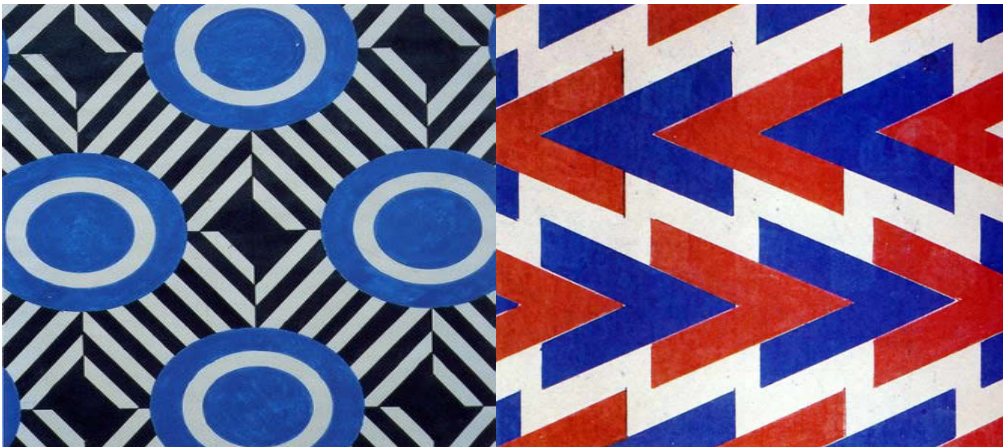


Figure 1: Varvara Stepanova wearing a dress of fabric produced to her own design. Photograph by Alexander Rodchenko, 1924.

Thus, Kiaer (2005) argues, in a Constructivist object, the commodity fetish and the implicated individual desires will not be eliminated but harnessed and reoriented towards collective goals and for the benefit of the collective.

The examples of how that conceptual ideal was to be realized, however, are scarce⁴. The work of two artists – Varvara Stepanova and Liubov' Popova – in designing textile patterns and Soviet clothing nevertheless provides some insight (Kiaer, 2005; Rodchenko et al., 1991). The artists shared the vision that bold geometric graphics in primary colors would transform the drab world of women dominated by

patriarchal floral patterns but approached the task of constructing Soviet dress somewhat differently. Stepanova focused on making patterns with optical



Figures 2 & 3: Varvana Stepanova's 'optical' designs for fabric, 1924.

4 In 'Rodchenko in Paris', Kiaer (2005) offers a fine discussion of Rodchenko's Worker's Club exhibit as a socialist object.

variations and kept simple boxy cuts in her designs. That is, the object's dynamism came from a chromatic vibrating effect in the fabric pattern. The effect multiplied when the same costume was seen on several bodies at once, thus a pattern was designed not so much for the sake of decoration but rather for the sake of enhancing sociality (Margolin, 1997).

Popova, for her part, focused on constructing versatile designs. Her full cut dresses often featured design elements, such as a large sash, that transformed a dress through use, rather than tailoring. That is to say, the object's dynamism was to be found in the transformative possibilities of the garment itself.



Figure 4: Varvara Stepanova's clothing designs, 1900-1930. Image reproduced in Lavrentiev (1988).

Overall however, the realities of the 1920s Soviet economy meant few opportunities for participation in mass production. Much of the Constructivists' effort thus focused on making sets for theater and cinema. The demonstration of new objects on stage sought to exemplify

absolutely new ways of life... against the setting of an old type of house' and to promote the vision of socialist living based on intelligence, discipline, and collective self-improvement. (Margolin, 1997: 101)

This logic also underlined the Constructivists' work in 'commercial propaganda' for several state-owned enterprises. The Constructivists marketed a variety of products from books, stationary, and light bulbs to cigarettes, biscuits, and rubbers. Whatever a product, their overtly didactic 'advertising constructions' often depicted objects in a singular functionality – a rubber boot was shown shielding from the rain, pacifiers – being sucked, and cookies – being devoured. Simplified graphics, photomontage, and flat colors were used to impress upon a

largely illiterate audience the urgency of adopting state-produced goods. Furthermore, in lieu of ‘products in [consumer] hands’, advertising posters, packaging, and logos were designed to ‘lead the attack on the trivial tastes’ represented by old bourgeois goods and open public’s eye to the beauty of socialist industry (ibid.: 113).

The determination of Constructivists notwithstanding, their work in building socialist objects and constructing a new collective-oriented material culture remained marginal. By the early 1930s, the art movement had been pushed out of the public arena, discredited and eventually squashed by the Stalinist regime. The Constructivists’ thesis on the transformative potential of consumption and the conception of everyday objects as *tovarishch* was too avant-garde for a time that came to be dominated by productivist visions of modern progress; and their experiments in organizing everyday life differently were too radical for the regime. Still, some Constructivists’ sensibilities found their peculiar realization in the Soviet material culture.



Figure 5: Liubov' Popova's dress design 1920s.

Tovarishch, n. – an appointed official; a formal title [*Tovarishch Ministra*] in a tsarist government since 1802

In the early 1930s, civil unrest swept the Soviet country. Reading popular discontent as a sign of the inability of the backward masses to internalize progressive socialist ideals, officials started the ideological campaign for *kul'turnost'* (literally, culturedness). The campaign sought to indoctrinate people into the values of socialism. In essence, it was a Soviet version of the ‘civilizing projects’ already underway in the interwar Europe and aimed at constructing modern – clean, physically able, and disciplined – subjects. In the Soviet case, the project also involved elementary literacy, proper manners, appropriate attire, aesthetic appreciation of culture and some basic knowledge of Communist ideology (see Hoffmann, 2003).

The Constructivists' notion that 'appropriate kinds of goods,' that is *socialist goods*, could serve instrumental purposes of collective ideological advancement became a cornerstone of the government's campaign and informed the 'cultured Soviet trade' system built at the time (Hessler, 2004). Thus, a special category of Soviet good – *kul't tovary* (cultured goods) such as stationery, musical instruments, watches, and sporting equipment was introduced and certain market techniques were adapted to serve the ideological purpose. For example, Soviet mail-order trade was set with the understanding that

every package delivered to peasants and teachers would be the best concrete agitator for Soviet industry, cities and workers. Through this package, we could have a wide and continuous political and cultural influence not only on the package recipients but dozens of their neighbors. (Iliin-Landski, 1928: 21)

Also, the state ran advertising campaigns for a variety of consumer goods so as to inform people of product usage, to promote new habits and to 'develop their taste' (see Snopkov et al., 2007). Thus, effectively in the 1930s Soviet Union, consumption emerged as a route towards the construction of a modern cultured Soviet citizenry (Hoffmann, 2003).

The rise of TeZhe, the state trust for cosmetics, is illustrative in this regard⁵. A product category seemingly incongruous with the socialist value of collective spiritual development, cosmetics, became implicated in the campaign for the culturedness of the masses. Polina Zhemchuzhina (wife of the Head of the Government at the time and later herself a Minister of Fishing Industry) was at the helm of TeZhe, charged with the Party's task of culturally uplifting the masses. In 1934, she declared the imminent industrialization of the Soviet cosmetics production in order to deliver 'beauty to everyday citizenry' (Zhemchuzhina, 1934: 8). Echoing the Constructivists, she insisted that unlike capitalist cosmetics, Soviet products were 'to be science-based: every product (cream, liquid soaps, lipstick) [were to] have a hygienic function' (ibid.). Thanks to her political connections, no expense was spared in purchasing foreign technologies, employing foreign specialists, setting agricultural zones for the cultivation of oil-rich plants and even the establishment of chemical research institutes.

By the mid-1930s, *TeZhe* was the largest category producer in Europe and a pioneer in industrial-scale medicinal enrichment of products – tooth powders with vitamin C and creams with pro-vitamin A and B-carotene. Not only did the

5 A detailed discussion of this case, including all the references to the original sources, can be found in Kravets and Sandikci (2013).

project yield success in creating smart products, but the propagandistic efforts set *TeZhe* out in their attempts to use consumer goods as a means of transforming everyday life and social consciousness. With the Constructivist dictum in mind, Zhemchuzhina stated that *TeZhe* products must carry out ‘cultured work’: that is, they must motivate citizens to take ‘correct and rational care of their bodies’ (No Author, 1935: 50). Toward this end, all products had to be ‘nicely packaged,’ since adults are ‘similar to children, who are more willing to wash with finely colored and shaped soaps’ (Zhemchuzhina, 1936: 56). Many artists were commissioned to design *TeZhe*’s bottles and labels, working on the Constructivism-informed directive that

package design was a part of the cultural revolution, and since images on products penetrated deeply into people’s minds, designs should transmit an ideological message, rather than communicate a package contents. (Zemenkov, 1930)

TeZhe’s commercial propaganda operated on the Constructivist principle of socialist construction; messages were explicitly didactic both with regards to product usage and with regards to their ideological purpose. The general pitch was that with the help of *TeZhe* products, women would be ‘cultured in body, attire, and manners’, thus achieving an aesthetic appearance essential for personal growth and for ‘equal participation in building a new beautiful Soviet life’⁶. As Hoffmann (2003) explains, the emphasis on appearance did not intend to turn women into sex objects but to accentuate their obligation to society in line with the Stalinist 1930s pro-natal policies. Overall, *TeZhe* framed the consumption of Soviet cosmetics as a civic duty, not an individual choice and stressed the importance of individuals adopting body-care regimes for the betterment of the Soviet collective.

With respect to the politics of consumption, the *TeZhe* case and the cultured Soviet trade policies of the 1930s are remarkable (and still awaiting a thorough investigation). This was a period when many political and economic decisions were made with the Constructivism-inspired belief that consumer goods were the best propagandists and the most effective agitators for the Soviet values and the Soviet way of living. Here, everyday objects could concretely speak to the backward populations, infusing them with socialist sensibilities, training them into progressive habits, and demonstrating the achievements (and promises) of the Soviet state. Put differently, Soviet goods were here conceived as socio-ideologically progressive, and as such were called upon to government service to lead the charge in the project of civilizing and politically uplifting the regressive masses.

6 Interview with P. Zhemchuzhina in the popular Soviet women’s weekly *Rabotnisa* (March, 1936) titled ‘Once again on beauty and culture’, 17-18.

Tovarishch, n. – a companion; someone who is frequently in the company of another; and often employed to assist, live with, or travel with another

The pre-World War II militarization and post-war need to rebuild the country were among the factors that led to the decommissioning of consumption from its strategic duty in the Soviet apparatus. Consumer good industries became the secondary sector i.e. financed according to the remainder principle. The Constructivist instruction to make objects that could be mass produced, having ‘an overall organization based on standardization, utility, health considerations, etc., serving the consumer as the entire collective’ (Lavinky, 1922; c.f. Andrews and Kalinovska, 1990: 81) came to dominate product design logic. The instruction was codified in the system of state standards (*gosudarstvenniyi standart* – GOST), originally set up in 1925. GOST was a set of normative specifications which sought to assure product functionality and safety, serving as a means of regulating production so as to achieve statewide efficiencies.

The realities of centralized planning produced systemic GOST reductivism. Firstly, while the number of standards grew over the years, many products were strictly limited in sizes, configurations and specifications. Secondly, the GOST system combined with the principle of bare-minimum in the state resource allocation meant that Soviet goods often were only minimally functional. Lemonade was drinkable, cheese was edible, and dress was wearable but with no promise about quality or value beyond that basic utility. What is more, the GOST system meant that even minimal functionality was a generalized one and required consumer participation in defining object’s utility. For example, as Gurova (2008) reports, there were only three brassiere sizes available in 1946; hence, many women bought merely an item called ‘brassiere’ which was not yet a usable product. In that sense, people often referred to a Soviet good as *polufabrikat* (pre-fabricated, not-ready-made), emphasizing that a product required investments of time, effort and capital before it could look and work properly.

Soviet consumption was a labor intensive practice. The efforts needed to acquire goods in the economy defined by a chronic deficit is now well-documented (e.g., Gurova, 2008; Klumbyte, 2010). Additionally, a substantive amount of work went to activate a product’s utility, to use it daily, and to keep it in use for as long as possible. Indeed, if construction is ‘a functional organization of material elements,’ characterized by ‘the best use of the materials,’ then everyone became a Constructivist (Andrews and Kalinovska, 1990: 65). Just as Arvatov had wished, Soviet goods now demanded ‘constant contact’ and ‘compel[led] people physically, and thus also psychologically, to reckon with them’ (1923[1997]: 126).

To illustrate, often an item bought as a ‘dress’ needed to be fitted to a size and style before it could be worn. In fitting, one had to be mindful of keeping possibilities for reuse open. Accordingly, sleeves, shoulders, and collar would be modified through tailoring, whereas body cut and length were adjusted in wearing, for example, with belts and pins. In this way, larger parts of an item (pieces of fabric) would be optimally preserved for future reuse. For the same reason, people opted for hand-washing and developed particular techniques of careful wearing and storing things. The authors of the collection on the Soviet ‘Repair Society’⁷ argue that this consumption orientation towards continuous use and reuse derives not only from the conditions of pervasive deficit but also, importantly, from the individual’s non-alienable labor invested in making a product usable. Possible similarities in psychological effects notwithstanding, the work of Soviet consumption was different from DIY/customization practices in the West.

By and large, this work was not a Martha Stewart craft hobby as self-actualization, neither was it a bohemian act of self-expression and/or creative resistance, nor purely a practice of austerity driven money saving. Rather, the nature of objects (*polufabrikat*) simply demanded work of re-design and individualization. Thus, customization was not a practice undertaken on occasion or a chosen endeavor but the very mode of Soviet consumption created and imposed by broader structural conditions. The compulsory school ‘lessons of labor’ (*urok truda*), where every girl learnt to make a basic dress and every boy to build a chair, and the popular genre of ‘Crafty Hands’ publications, assured that everyone could participate in such modes of consumption.

So Soviet goods were different from capitalist commodities. In the Soviet economy, objects appeared free, at least to an extent, from producer determinism. Archival pages of ‘Handy Hints’ in the women’s weekly *Rabotnitsa*, evince a strange realization of the Constructivists’ utopia: in Soviet consumption, everything is changeable, possible to make and improve (Margolin, 1997). And the bitterly proverbial ‘101 Uses of Female Stockings’ is a twisted reality of the Constructivists’ dream of infinite transformable – anything can be totally changed whatever the original material form (Rodchenko et al., 1991). Then, in Soviet time, what one actually bought was *potentiality* waiting to be (re)defined as a particular object. One bought ‘in case’, meaning regardless of what an item claimed to be, and with the distinct possibility that it could be (made) useful now

7 *Neprikosnovennyi Zapas*, a Russian sociological journal published a series under the title ‘Repair Society’ with articles by Gerasimova E. and S. Chuikina (2004, v. 34) and Gurova O. (2004, v. 34) among others; available at <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2004/34/>.

or later, to oneself or someone else, and importantly with the intention of multiple reuses. That is, the object's use value was only tentatively inscribed in Soviet goods - the onus was on a consumer to create and articulate that value. The embedded imperative for contact with 'productive reality' meant that Soviet goods indexed social value differently than 'bourgeois things' (Arvatov, 1923 [1997]): socio-ideological categorization was not only a matter of possession (certain goods and/or quantities) but also a matter of knowledge and skills. Within the Soviet mode of consumption, an unusable and/or discarded product was not an indication of an object's defect or failing, but of the failure and uselessness (*nikchemnost*) of a person (Gurova, 2008).

Soviet goods of the post-World War II period came close to the Constructivists' ideal of socialist goods: extremely adaptable and transformable, thus dynamic, they always evinced labor (as only a DIY object can), implicated mindful consumption, and were thoroughly social (Arvatov, 1923 [1997]; Gough, 2005; Kiaer, 2005). Their acquisition and consumption were premised on and constitutive of various socialities and solidarities across the generations of Soviet people (Gurova, 2008; Klumbytë, 2010). Still, Soviet goods were not *bona fide* Rodchenko's *tovarishch*: highly personalized and individualized in consumption, they stood in opposition to the Constructivists' values of universality and primacy of objective value.

The dynamism of objects, based on reductivism in production and increase of labor in consumption, overburdened consumers with the responsibility for the total design of their daily lives (and the image they offered to the outside world) and resulted in anxiety of self-design (being subjected to aesthetic and ethical judgments of the state and the publics) and over-dependence upon the taste of others. The Constructivists' intense flexibility of objects posited as emancipation for both objects and people, in fact turned into a form of control; the requisite work of consumption psycho-physically bound people to 'the material world of things' and to the system of often oppressive social forms of everyday life. Put differently, Soviet goods of the state planned economy were more like bad travel companions: people you end up with by virtue of circumstances and whose presence, with time, becomes nauseating and burdensome because they require constant attention and investment of emotional and physical labor.

Tovarishch, n. – a friend; a person regarded with affection and trust; a fellow soldier

The end of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s for many people meant liberation from the oppressive ‘camaraderie’ of Soviet goods. A few years ago, I interviewed a woman in her 60s, who said that ‘freedom was about not having to wash and dry plastic bags’. Some scholars suggest that the Soviet regime indeed imploded due to the bottled-up desire for the very fashionable, embellished, disposable goods that Rodchenko resented in Paris (see Fehérváry, 2009). The desire that, as Constructivists recognized, could not be destroyed on a Party order, rather ought to be to redirect towards collective goals. Apparently, Soviet products (highly standardized, minimally functional, and without alternatives) dismally failed. Yet, despite this failure and the collapse of the entire Soviet economy, Soviet goods did not disappear completely. Recent market reports state that goods manufactured according to Soviet GOSTs still dominate many product categories. More remarkably, some Soviet goods emerged as cultural artifacts, assuming a central role in making sense of the past and present society.

In ‘From stigma to cult’, Merkel (2006) discusses the cult of the Trabi, an East German car. Similarly, Klumbytė (2010) tells of the reincarnation of the ‘Soviet sausage’ as a socio-political symbol in Lithuania. I have also explored the cultural iconization of the Soviet cheese *Druzhba* (friendship) in Russia (Kravets and Orge, 2010). These accounts demonstrate that Soviet goods were propelled to such cultural status by a high degree of standardization, normalization, and durability across space and time, the values so praised by Constructivists but also so damned as tangible evidence of socialist economic inefficiency (see Fehérváry, 2009). However, *contra* Constructivists, today the focus on ‘material form’ – specifically, aesthetic constancy – not only trumps a product’s utility (and deficiencies and failings thereof) but transforms a Soviet good into a mythical figure – a hero, which triumphantly survived the ordeals of living under the Soviet regime and the regime’s breakdown. A Soviet good appears endowed with an array of human qualities and an anthropomorphic power of agency. To illustrate, I would like to reproduce here a poem⁸ to Soviet cheese:

8 This poem by Igor Ignatiev was broadcasted in the radio program on 14 November 2003. Archived print-out is available at www.echo.msk.ru/programs/plsyrok.

Российский плавленный сырок
 В года суровых испытаний
 Во дни сомнений и метаний
 Был над тобой не властен рок.
 Ветрами грозными продут,
 Ты воплощал народный гений,
 И был для многих поколений
 Скорее символ, чем продукт.
 В эпоху непроглядной тьмы
 Кремлевским в пику истуканам,
 Разливши водку по стаканам,
 Тобой закусывали мы.
 Хотя и меньше, чем едой,
 Но ты был больше, чем закуской.
 Ты был идеей нашей русской
 И путеводною звездой...

Russian processed cheese. In days of
 doubts and quests, fate was powerless
 over you. Blasted by formidable winds,
 you embodied people's genius. And
 for many generations, you have been
 more of a symbol than a product.

During the epoch of bleak darkness, in
 spite of Kremlin dummies, we poured
 vodka into glasses and chased it down
 with you. Although less than a meal,
 you were certainly more than a snack.
 You were our Russian (national) idea.
 And a guiding star...

Clearly, albeit poetically over-expressed, a Soviet product is presented here as a *tovarishch* in the romantic sense – someone who endured the same difficulties, shared the same dangers, strived for the same cause and has therefore become highly regarded. Imbued with affective values, an object appears to have transcended its original object-ness but in a manner that so flagrantly defies the Constructivists' ideal! In this case, the object becomes an extreme objectification, a concretion of past events and experiences, a memory touchstone, a fixture binding social practices, an index of cultural values, and a symbol of the Soviet epoch, which makes it into a non-objective entity – an icon. It is a fetish par excellence of the Soviet life that never was⁹. This ascent to an iconic status casts goods such as Druzhba cheese and 'Soviet sausage' as valuable economic entities in the sign-value dominated post-Fordist market economy. The symbolic qualities ascribed to Soviet goods and the mere recognizability of their 'material form' among the peoples of former Soviet territories means that the exchange value of everyday Soviet goods now well exceeds their use value (see Klumbytë, 2010). Thus, in post-socialist Russia, transformed (through collective processes of remembering and forgetting the Soviet past) into a *tovarishch*, a Soviet product, like *Druzhba*, became a valued *tovar* and a private property, a capitalist object proper.

9 For a detailed discussion of this process and life of Soviet products in post-socialist Russia see Kravets and Orge (2010).

Coda

In telling this story of Soviet goods, my intent was not to contribute to the current sentiments that the socialist project is dead and that the Constructivists' ideals are thoroughly utopian endorsements of Bolshevik rule. Instead, my discussion attempts to suggest the need to attend more precisely to the ideological and political dimensions of Constructivism. Both the Constructivists' own experimentations and the grotesque Soviet attempts to differently construct 'the world of everyday things' were hampered by a poor material base in Russia and the Party's focus on rapid modernization of a heavy industry. The Constructivists' utopian vision, then, was left largely un-translated. Aware of the organizing effects of objects on human subjects, theirs was a vision for a fundamental restructuring of social relations and social conditions premised on different relationships to things. What could these different relations be and how could they be constructed? This remains an open question.

Arvatov, Rodchenko and others proposed that we make an object equal, a co-worker and a comrade, i.e. a subject, with the belief that a subject position is inherently liberatory, bound to equality and new forms of social organization. The history of struggles for emancipation, however, attests to the limits of a subject status. Obtaining socio-political rights often does not result in an elimination of inequalities and a fundamental change of the power structure that sustained the relations of objectification. One form of objectification tends to be replaced by another, in fact many others. As one becomes a subject of politics, she also becomes an object of policies and markets. Also, contrary to the Constructivists' faith in the emancipatory power of technology for both things and people, technology made objectification easier and also aided the proliferation of forms of objectification.

This is not to suggest that we, as subjects, are not implicated in objectifying ourselves. As human subjects, we seem entangled in a chain of objectification and self-objectification (see Bartky, 1990). To become equal with an object, then, I propose we embrace the *tovar* in *tovarishch* and give up our romantic attachment to a subject position. I do not propose this as an exercise in empathy. Many current discussions on subject-object relations, particularly in the context of sustainability, take this general route of empathy i.e. we must see and/or treat objects differently, from 'take better care of objects' to 'recognize that objects have their own phenomenology'.

I would instead suggest, in the spirit of Constructivist experimentation, the following: why not become a 'black on black' – a formless, un-individual, non-

identity-able mass over black¹⁰, and accept, rather than avoid, the invisibility, silence, and unknown-ness of matter. After all, one way that the Constructivists tried to eliminate the well-worn world of social conventions, principles, structures, and forms (of representation) was to dissolve them into abstraction. The idea was to erase differences and bring out alternative forms of connections and relations, in order for a new essence of an aesthetico-political organization to emerge.

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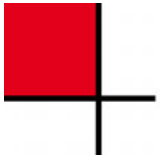
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¹⁰ In 1918 Rodchenko created a series of 'Black on Black' paintings. In Russian avant-garde, the concept of 'black' is complex, yet scarcely elaborated. Roughly put, as 'no color,' black represents nothing but itself, still it does not denote a passive emptiness but a space of an infinite generative potential (e.g., Lavrentiev et al., 2005: 14-15; 98).

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Can the object be a comrade?

Stephen Shukaitis

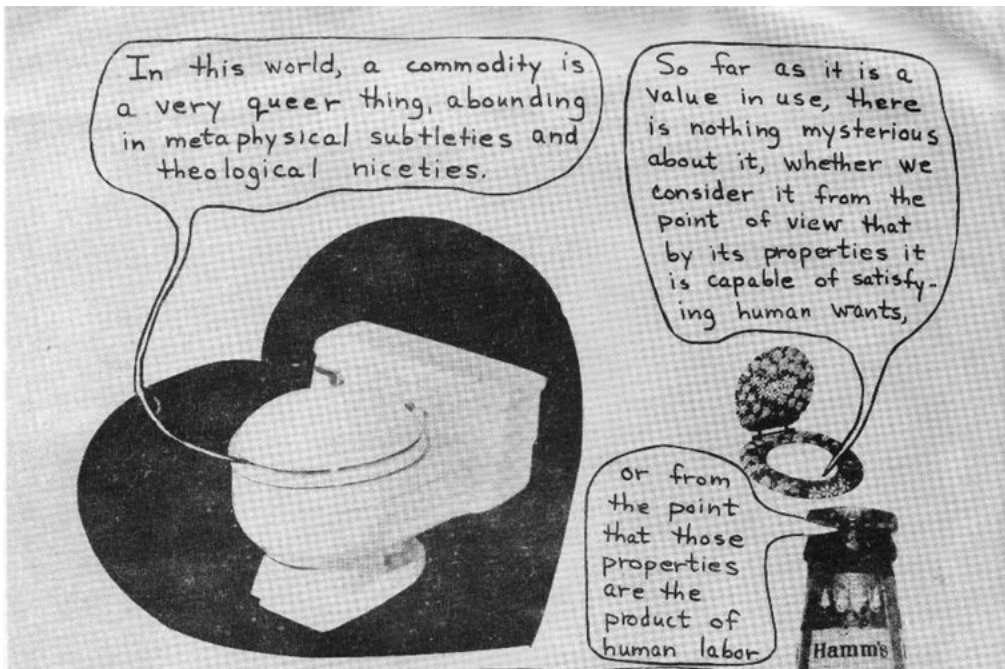


Image from Perlman (1969).

What would commodities say if they could speak? If Marx had listened long enough, would these talking commodities announce the traumas of their exploitative and violent birthing to him? Eventually, one imagines, they would have described the nature of the various forms of labour necessary for their production in the capitalist mode. As Fred Moten (2003) points out, history is marked by the revolt of the screaming commodity: the body of the slave fighting

against its imposed status of thing-lieness¹. The rise of consumer culture, the proliferation and intensification of the commodity form, can be understood as the expansion of the violence of accumulation all across the social field. The ferocious forces which separate the producer from the product of the labour process have not waned; on the contrary, they have become monstrously multiplied and rendered all the more invisible by their ubiquity in the society of the spectacle (Debord, 1983).

But then what is to be done for those who are lost in the supermarket? Would the goal of commodity politics be to break on through the mystical shell of the commodity in order to listen to it speak? If it was possible to break through the fetish character of commodities, would it then be easier to listen to their stories of exploitation and misery, and based upon them formulate new forms of politics? What then would be the politics of commodities without their fetish? Rather than Bruno Latour's 'parliament of things' (1993) would we then have a democracy of ex-commodities?

Stepping back a moment from these real abstractions we can see that the political approach that has tried most consistently to peel back the mystical character of the commodity has been the fair trade movement. As Sarah Lyon suggests (2006), the greatest value of fair trade is less in the concrete benefits it provides (which are much debated) and more in its capacity to demystify forms of commodity production: revealing labour and ecological costs, making the commodities speak forth the truth of their production rather than letting these labours disappear in the magic of market exchange. But the problem with this approach, as Lyon herself realizes, is that the fetish character of the commodity is more than just a phenomenon that can be easily dispelled through somewhat polite conversation and clever marketing. The problem with fair trade is that it does not dispel the mystical character of the commodity so much as inscribe it on an even deeper level, creating a new type of spectacular consumption where consumers from more developed regions can directly subsidize the middle classes of developing areas and reap the benefits of the ethical fetish.

But if the attempt to get beneath the mystical layer of the commodity leads to yet another mystical layer beneath that, what then is to be done? Is there nothing but layer upon layer of fetish?² Is there any escape from this? At first glance it seems that the formulation of a commodity politics are trapped in much the same

1 Indeed, slave revolts are integral to the development of the modern world system, including the founding of nations (James, 1989) and the abolition of slavery itself (Hart, 2002).

2 For more on this see Mulvey (1993).

predicament analyzed by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), where any attempts to escape from capitalist logic merely end up becoming the tools for instilling a new spirit of capitalism. Is it the case, as Mark Fisher has suggested (2009), that the old struggle between subversions and incorporation has been played out, now replaced by a dynamic of *pre-corporation* where apparently dangerous cultural practices are from their beginning formatted according to the logic of the capitalist market?

Ethical spectacle and comradely objects

What I want to explore in this brief piece is a different approach to the problem, one that does not get stuck in the same dilemma. The answer in its most concentrated form is rather simple and obvious: if it seems impossible to escape from the mystical character of the commodity, why not use it instead of attempting to dispel it?

Perhaps the best attempt to think through commodity politics in such a manner is provided by Stephen Duncombe. In his book *Dream: Re-imagining progressive politics in an age of fantasy* (2007) Duncombe proposes an approach based on working through collective fantasies as the basis for a new politics, rather than trying to escape from them. According to Duncombe, all marketing and advertising is about transformation: promising the potential fulfillment, self-betterment, and pleasure through a purchase decision. And while it may be true that ultimately commodities always fail to deliver on these promises (and to some degree they must fail in order to perpetuate continual patterns of consumption), the desires circulating within this process are perfectly realisable. Duncombe works through a number of examples, from Las Vegas to video games, to ask what a politics that took these desires seriously would look like.

What Duncombe proposes instead is what he refers to as ‘ethical spectacle’. While the spectacular forms employed within marketing and advertising employ illusion in the pretense of portraying reality, the ethical spectacle instead portrays the reality of its own illusions. Duncombe draws from the ideas of Berthold Brecht, in particular his notion of the ‘alienation effect’ in which, as part of his plays, he would draw attention to their very status as plays (rather than letting them pass into anything resembling a naturalist narrative). The purpose of ethical spectacle is to remind viewers of the spectacular nature of their conditions. This is done not as a form of critique that creates distance from the situation, but rather brings spectators-potential political actors back to the real conditions they are in without dismissing flows of desire that form the situation. Duncombe likewise describes a number of artistic and protest groups – from the

Yes Men to Reverend Billy – that employ this approach of creating ethical spectacles through their artistic-political interventions.

This argument leads us back to the ideas developed by the Russian Constructivists in the 1920s. Working in the post-revolutionary conditions, and during a period of rapid social change, these artists-engineers tried to figure out what would be the best ways to use artists' practices to aid in the building of a communist society. In the early 1920s they had to think through some of the same questions around the politics [of consumption?] as the introduction of the New Economic Policy partially re-introduced market based exchange into Russia. As shown in Christina Kiaer's study of constructivism, rather than trying to dispel the power of the commodity the constructivists decided to embrace it, 'confronting the phantasmic power of the commodity object and reclaiming it for socialism' (2005: 90). The constructivists, in their quest to free up new technical and industrial capacities, thus strove to break the spell of the commodity while retaining it as a site of individual and collective formation of fantasy. To use Stephen Duncombe's framing, they kept the power of the commodity but turned it into a form of ethical spectacle.

This approach was given its fullest and most complete expression by Boris Avratov, who argued that rethinking one's relation to commodities and objects was part of the overall transformation of everyday life, and thus fundamental. Avratov rejected the idea that objects are passive, or objects of consumption, and thus merely acted upon. For Avratov the idea of the thing as complete and static in its material status, and therefore dead, is what categorizes bourgeois conceptions of material culture. Instead of this approach Avratov argued for understanding objects as fundamentally functional and active, and therefore 'connected like a co-worker with human practice' (1997: 26). While at first glance this argument for the embracing of commodity objects as comrades might seem rather strange, it could also be seen to logically flow from Marx's image of the talking commodity. For Avratov, the task of the proletariat is to 'create a systematically regulated dynamism of things' (1997: 128) extending the processes that are already in motion within commodity production³. Thus commodities become not sites of fantasies and mystifications that need to be disavowed, fetishes to be torn away, but rather co-workers participating in the activity of shaping socialist reality, thus recognizing 'affective power of mass produced objects of modernity' (Kiaer, 2005: 27).

3 This connects to the Constructivists notion of *faktura*, or the surface that shows its own process of making. The Constructivists employed this idea to focus on the self-acting power of matter itself, and thus to approach objects (artistically and otherwise) by trying to work with and through these powers, rather than attempting to impose designs on matters conceived of as passive (Kiaer, 2005: 50).

Communist objects and network cultures

Production thus produces not only the object but also the manner of consumption, not only objectively but also subjectively. Production thus creates the consumer. (Marx, 1973: 92)

These ideas have been developed recently by Nick Thoburn, who explores the formation of books as anti-commodities, or as communist objects, drawing from the ideas of the Constructivists. For Thoburn the communist object destabilizes the associations and meanings we usually attribute to objects (and their passivity). Thus the communist object holds the potential for opening up a new conceptual framework for understanding labour by considering how it gestures to forms of the labour performed outside independent of the human. Or, to state it bluntly, if objects themselves are workers, this requires a rethinking of exactly what it is to be a worker. Communist objects resist patterns of work, whether from capitalist or communist demands, that more compliant objects submit to. They throw a monkey wrench in the best-laid Taylorist plans.

For Thoburn the communist object is of great importance for the way it, as a comrade and coworker, destabilizes our conceptions and roles by claiming a status of equality, gesturing towards how ‘the passional bond it produces emerges in the midst of everyday objects and desires activated in commodity culture’ (2010: 9). At the 1925 Paris International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts, Aleksandr Rodchenko quite astonishingly argued that capitalism was not just the exploitation of workers by the inhuman process of accumulating capital, but rather the exploitation of the human and the object (2010: 3). The reframing of communist objects reworks that relation, trying to conceptualize it as a matter of equality⁴.

But what then does this interesting excursion through the ideas of the Stephen Duncombe, Nick Thoburn and the Constructivists tell us? At first glance these might seem to be nothing more than the whimsical notions of some artists from a long time ago, now recycled through the equally whimsical wanderings of contemporary social theory. But considered more closely in relation to the rise of digital network cultures these ideas become much more immediately relevant. For what is network culture if not the proliferation of helpful objects, commodities acting in all sorts of non-passive and attempted comradely ways? Nowadays it seems that almost any, and probably every, household object has been fitted with some sort of high tech design feature that aims to facilitate user

4 This statement appeared originally in a personal letter Rodchenko wrote to this wife. Some of these letters were later reprinted as a report on the 1925 Expo. Thus it was never a stand-alone declaration.

experience. Whether or not it actually works that way is another question, but the stated intent is there, albeit stripped of orientation to build a new socialist society through a renewed relation to objects.

If today we are enmeshed in an intensified form of participatory digital production, in the logic of punk capitalism (Mason 2008) and convergence culture (Hay and Couldry, 2012), bastard culture (Schafer 2011), or whatever name you prefer, the questions raised by the Constructivists and the politics of fantasy that Stephen Duncombe explores are all the more important because of how these transformations in cultural production and social relations intensify rather than dispel commodity dynamics. As Owen Hatherley has argued (2008), the interactive formats of web 2.0 in many ways can be seen as degenerated forms of the interactive forms of cultural production that the Constructivists and other artists argued for in the 1920s in their attempts to reshape society. However, the proliferation of interactive formats within net culture has not necessarily meant that anything more interesting is being said or that social relations are being reshaped in the ways that the Constructivists desired⁵. Rather, having to enter a hidden abode of production we find ourselves confronted by an all too visible social factory, where value is produced everywhere extracted from free labour, and exploitation is hidden in plain sight (Bohm and Land, 2012; Zwick et al., 2008).

Where then does this leave us, with what form of commodity politics? Here I would agree with the argument put forth by Frederic Jameson that the analysis of commodification leads us back to ‘some prior discussion of the more fundamental phenomenon of objectification as such, or the organization of reality into things’ (2009: 257-258). While it is necessary to pass through the politics of the commodity it is inadvisable to remain there. The question then is

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- 5 For Hatherley this is because the rise of participatory culture has neglected the emphasis on learning and education. In other words, participatory formats do not by themselves lead to a greater democratization of social relationships, despite the wishes of many tech fetishists that this would be the case. Likewise it would be important to emphasize that for Arvatov and Rodchenko, activeness or dynamism is not an abstract but a concrete entity rooted in *faktura*. It is rooted in the physical nature of the object, and the purposefulness of the constructed object. For Rodchenko, things will become equal, as comrades, when they strive for the same ‘higher’ ideal (vs. being helpful and serving men/people). Rodchenko admired capitalist objects – engineering, design, etc. – but kept asking ‘What for?’ He saw them as lacking this ‘higher’ social purpose. Arvatov seems to have shared the concern; his ‘definition’ of a ‘socialist object’ included an awkward word *tselesoobraznost* (which implies purposefulness in a more abstracted sense rather than just a function or utility).

in passing through commodity politics to more fundamental questions of politics and organization, what is it that we learned from the talking commodities that we encountered along the way? What I would venture here is that the task is learning from commodities and objects not as active substances so that we can include them in a democracy of objects. Rather it is more a question of seeing how objects can be temporary autonomous zones that liberate autonomy for the sake of non-humans; and learning from that what exactly autonomy might be when it is a question of autonomy from the human (Morton 2011)⁶.

Commodity politics raises the question of whether we can relate to objects as comrades, through that vastly expanding our conceptions of labour, perhaps even forming a post-humanist labour movement (Walker, 2012). It is the challenge of a communism of objects: not a mastery over them, but a comradely working through and with them.

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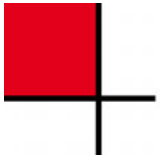
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Commodity as comrade: Luibov Popova – Untitled textile design on William Morris wallpaper for Historical Materialism

David Mabb

I



As a designer, William Morris thought that interior design had a fundamental role to play in the transformation of everyday life.¹ His hand printed textile and wallpaper designs are highly schematised representations of nature, where it is always summer and never winter; the plants are always in leaf, often flowering, with their fruits available in abundance, ripe for picking, and with no human labour in sight. This is a utopian vision, an image of *Cokaygne*, the medieval mythical land of plenty, but easily acceptable to the upper middle classes and even some aristocrats of the time. Today his work is very safe and comfortable, and his wallpaper and

fabric designs are widely reproduced in machine printed form and can be found

¹ All images *Luibov Popova Untitled Textile Design on William Morris wallpaper for Historical Materialism* 2010 by David Mabb.

furnishing the most conservative semis of middle England. Although a form of democratisation of Morris' designs, their wide availability is also a debasement, as a compromise is made whereby what Morris called 'beauty' is sacrificed for mass production. It is the space opened up by the contradictions between how Morris' designs can be read, and how they have subsequently come to be used and understood, that the prints navigate.

II

During 1923-24, shortly after the Russian revolution, the Constructivist artist Luibov Popova designed textiles for the First State Cotton-Printing Factory in Moscow. Christina Kiaer writes that Popova and fellow artist Varvara Stepanova were

the only Constructivists to see their designs for everyday, utilitarian things (other than posters and publication graphics) actually mass-produced and distributed in the Soviet economy. They fulfilled the Constructivist brief of abandoning the role of individual artist-craftsman and entering into collective factory production as 'artist-productivists' to produce utilitarian things for the socialist collective. (Kiaer, 2001: 186)



Popova's and Stepanova's textile designs during this period are virtually indistinguishable: simple bold geometric patterns in black and primary colours, often with optical effects. In 1925 Alexander Rodchenko, in a letter to Varvara Stepanova, his collaborator, comrade and wife, wrote, 'Our things in our hands must be equals, comrades, and not these black and mournful slaves...' It is this counterproposal to capitalism's

commodity fetish that inspired what Christine Kiaer has called the 'comradely object of socialist modernity' (2005).

III

In the prints shown here, one of Popova's textile designs in red and black is screen-printed onto different contemporary machine printed Morris wallpapers, including well known designs such as *Fruit*, *Willow Boughs*, *Trellis*, *Brier Rabbit*, *Medway* and *Daisy*. As a consequence of the different wallpapers used, and the random registration process (each of the Popova designs is printed in a slightly different place on each Morris design), each work is unique. The prints measure

52.5 cm, the width of a roll of wallpaper, by 70 cm, and were issued in an edition of one hundred. The prints were advertised at the *Historical*



Materialism conference in London 2010, in the *Historical Materialism* journal and on the *Historical Materialism* and other leftist websites. The proceeds are being used to publish an English translation of the writings of Boris Arvatov, the Russian art historian and critic who promoted the production of utilitarian objects by artists and the organization of everyday life by artistic methods. He wrote, amongst other things, 'Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing', (Aratov, 1997) which 'attempts to imagine how socialism will transform the passive capitalist commodity into an active socialist object' (Kiaer, 1997).

IV

Although Popova's Constructivist designs arose in a different geographical and historical context, and are visually very different from Morris' designs, both artists produced them as part out of a commitment to the transformation of everyday life. In the prints, the separate designs come together as comrades, to create a dialogue where the Popova and the Morris designs 'radicalise' each other, revivifying the political content of each to create active socialist objects that purposely suggest an emergent transformation of the world.

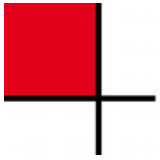


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Re-appropriating Che's image: From the revolution to the market and back again

Antigoni Memou

The story is well known. Alberto Korda Díaz's second snapshot of Ernesto Che Guevara, taken on March the 5th, 1960, at a mass funeral service that Fidel Castro called for the Cubans who were killed during an explosion in Havana, was destined to become probably one of the most reproduced and appropriated pictures of the late twentieth century. The photograph remained in Korda's studio until Che's death in 1967, when an Italian publisher, Gian-Giacomo Feltrinelli, produced posters using two prints of the image given as a gift to him by Korda. The various versions of posters produced by Feltrinelli, by Cuban Niko (Antonio Pérez González) and by the Irish artist Jim Fitzpatrick, almost contemporaneous with the poster boom of the late 1960s and the growing international youth audience interested in the political struggles for justice and freedom, gave to the image its iconic status. These posters were gradually converted into an emblem of revolution, seen as banners carried by demonstrators in the streets of Paris and Mexico and in the anti-war marches around the globe in 1968, often accompanied by the slogans '*¡Hasta la Victoria Siempre!*' and '*¡Unidos Venceremos!*' The revolutionary purity and romanticism of Che's ideas, his anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism and internationalism were personified in the image of the young man with the long hair, the aggressive gaze, the beard and the beret with the star, a source of inspiration for the revolutionary youth in Western capitalist societies.

In the years that followed, the merchandising activity of Che's portrait has been frenetic. The image has been endlessly reproduced from posters and T-shirts central to youth counterculture to advertisements for vodka, jeans and soap powder and represented an outstanding example of state kitsch in Cuba. Artists still appropriate Che's image to make art objects, Hollywood stars such as

Madonna and Cher have been photographed in his recognisable style, Christians in the Media have rendered Christ in a Che style poster for their religious propaganda¹. Within these absolutely different settings, the picture was deprived of its ideological and political context and appeared timeless and ahistorical. Che had acquired an appeal similar to other dead Hollywood stars, like James Dean and Marilyn Monroe. It had almost been forgotten that this man had sacrificed his life in the struggle against capitalism and imperialism, rendering Che's image the most appropriate example for Debord's observation:

the whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. All that once was directly lived become mere representation. (1994: 12)

More recent and widely debated scholarly work has argued that since the 1960s, consumerism has absorbed the so-called counterculture leaving little, if any, space for resistance against the central ideology of capitalism (Heath and Potter, 2004). Following this line of thought, the image of an anti-capitalist revolutionary becomes just another commodity subject to the same logic of the capitalist market mechanism. Yet, another use of the image, more resilient, resistant and hopeful, that does not conform to this logic, can be retrieved from social and political struggles and radical everyday experience. Che's image has been used by many contemporary Latin American political movements in a straightforwardly inspirational, creative and radical way. In the small towns of Chiapas, Che's image appears in banners that are made either collectively or by single artists or in murals, which are often chosen as background for photographs of the Zapatistas. An integral part of a long revolutionary tradition of the continent that brings together the revolutionaries Emiliano Zapata, Simón Bolívar, Manuelita Saenz and Che Guevara with the Zapatistas, Che's image attains a symbolic function in the struggle and the everyday life of the indigenous communities, setting a narrative of modern man's struggle for human emancipation and self-determination (Subcomandante Marcos, 2002: 104).

The Zapatistas have invented new radical ways to re-appropriate and re-radicalise the oft reproduced image of Che. Indicatively, the banners of Che, along with other references to local history and culture, featured in the highly symbolic march, known as Zapatour, led by twenty four Zapatista commanders including Marcos between February and April 2001. This march of indigenous people outside Chiapas, following the route that Zapata took in 1914 through the Mexican countryside, visited several communities along the way and ended up in the Mexican congress, encouraging a dialogue with civil society. In another

¹ For a detailed analysis of the appropriation of Che's image see: Trisha Ziff (ed.) (2006).

instance, Marcos was photographed in the easily recognisable red-and-black poster style of Che for the cover of the Guardian, manipulating the mass media obsession with his hidden identity (Guardian Weekend 2001). The cover line 'Why Marcos is the Che Guevara of his generation' was followed by Naomi Klein's analysis of the theory of Zapatismo and the position of Marcos within a non-hierarchical democratic indigenous community in insurrection. Marcos's deep understanding of the power of visual imagery for the sustainability of the struggle and his self-conscious interaction with the media and construction of an image for media spectacle subverts Max Horkheimer's statement that the 'mass media assimilate the revolution by absorbing its leaders into their list of celebrities' (Max Horkheimer 1978: 112). Marx once asserted that in all revolutions the dead are resurrected for the 'purpose of glorifying the new struggles' (1979: 101). So are their images, one could add.

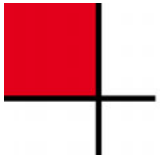
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In praise of anti-capitalist consumption: How the V for Vendetta mask blows up Hollywood marketing

Ruud Kaulingfreks and Femke Kaulingfreks

A massive protest took to the streets and squares of the world in 2011. In a sense, we can almost speak of a global protest movement, emerging simultaneously in different cities and spreading across the globe, demanding a just society, real democracy, and condemning capitalism. A renewed feeling of urgency brought people *en masse* together in a struggle for liberation from the yoke of the dictatorship of both repressive political regimes, and capitalist financial markets. Even Time magazine bought into the trend, and named the protester person of the year 2011¹.

One of the many remarkable features of this protest movement, is the use of social media, and the mixture of real life protest in the streets and ideological discussion on the internet. Be it the Egyptian protesters who took to the Tahrir square in Cairo, the *indignados* movement occupying the Puerta del Sol in Madrid, or the Occupy movement in Wall Street, they all started with calls, set out through internet based media. Electronic devices were used in all movements to inform people, and initially bring people together on the streets, where they further organized themselves. This same use of expensive technology, also formed the basis for critique, especially on the Occupy movement. How can one struggle for liberation from the capitalist yoke, with a Samsung smartphone and an Apple laptop in one's hand? The fact that a movement like Occupy could not

1 See: http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2101745_2102132_2102373-1,00.html.

have spread without the help of such capitalist commodities, would signify that it is not possible to do away with capitalism all together.

We wish to refute this critique and, together with Shukaitis (this issue), we believe that a progressive and anti-capitalist, commodity politics is possible. As an iconic example we take the Guy Fawkes mask that has been used in almost all protests. This mask is the merchandizing product of the Hollywood film *V for Vendetta* (James McTeigue, 2005). The story is based on the comic book with the same title, by Alan Moore and David Lloyd (1988). In the story, an anarchist revolting hero, by the name of V, brings down a totalitarian British government after an atomic war took place. V is always hidden behind a Guy Fawkes mask.

The mask is one of the best-sold items on Amazon, where it can be purchased for roughly 5 US dollars. Consumers are encouraged to buy it, in order to become a 'freedom fighter'², and it is recommended in consumer reviews as perfect to safeguard one's anonymity during demonstrations, or to 'stir up ones neighbourhood'. One reviewer warns fellow buyers to make sure the mask does not impede one's visibility while planning to blow up the parliament at night, referring to the historical figure Guy Fawkes, a British anarchist from the 16th century³. The mask was adopted by hackers collective Anonymous and was widely used during Occupy gatherings. It has become an icon of anti-capitalist protest. Although it still is a commodity related to a Hollywood film, it has the power to inspire the revolt.

The mask shows that in a world of ubiquitous consumption, some commodities can be used for an autonomous finality, proving that a certain anti-capitalist consumption is possible. Anonymous uses the mask because it fits perfectly well with their aims. As the name shows, Anonymous is proud of not identifying itself. The movement relies on swarm intelligence, as explained amongst others, by Hardt and Negri (2004). It is the combined efforts of the interchangeable elements of the swarm, which produce a common intelligence, able of great achievements. The same auto-organizing power, without a classical hierarchical structure, is applied by the Occupy movement, which presents itself as 'the 99 %'. Swarm intelligence relies on non-identity. Occupy draws its convincing power exactly from the fact that it represents the majority of interchangeable people, living under shared conditions, and having common demands. It is the

2 See: http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_noss_1?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=v+for+vendetta+mask.

3 See: http://www.amazon.com/Rubies-Costume-Co-4418-Vendetta/dp/B000UVGLHU/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1344886343&sr=8-1&keywords=v+for+vendetta+mask.

multitude (ibid.) from which no-one stands out. Anonymity is of huge importance in creating a non-identity, and therefore a non-individualisation, which can be used as a strategy to counter-attack mechanisms of discipline, and hierarchical organization based on control.

In contrast to this strategy, marketing promises tailor made products for individuals, and consumption runs on the individuality of the consumer. Individualization and identification are two pillars of capitalism, and a central feature of consumption. A capitalist consumption of commodities creates the illusion that you stand out from the crowd as an individual, with a strong and recognizable identity. Branding aims to present the consumer with a specific identity. Supporters of Occupy and Anonymous, by wearing the mask, directly oppose this marketing ideology. The commodity then is transformed into its opposite: those who buy the V for Vendetta mask and identify with Occupy and Anonymous, are actually proud of not identifying themselves. In this sense, anonymity runs counter to ubiquitous consumption and presents a powerful political weapon against the capitalist ideology of the free, individual consumer. The paradox of this move is that the vehicle of this transformation is a commodity, which has changed its meaning in the hands of the consumer. The logic of capitalism is turned around into something we ironically would like to call anti-capitalist consumption.

The example of the V for Vendetta mask shows how the consumption of capitalist commodities can result in a strategic change of the use, meaning and purpose of these commodities. Smartphones can be used in demonstrations to escape kettling techniques of the riot police, as the app shows, which was developed by London based activist group 'The Sukey Project'. Laptops can be used to hack the websites of capitalist multinationals and repressive governmental institutions, as repeatedly demonstrated by Anonymous. There is even a fashion line for rioters⁴. Such forms of anti-capitalist consumption draw on the strategy of the parasite. The relation between the host and the parasite is not only abusive, as French philosopher Michel Serres shows (2007). Parasitism is a form of exchange. The parasite seems to take without giving, but he repays its host with a different currency. The uninvited guest at a dinner table pays with conversation and stories (Serres, 2007: 34).

The parasite invents something new. Since he does not eat like everyone else, he builds a new logic. (2007: 35)

4 See <http://www.sindominio.net/fiambrera/web-agencias/paginas/index/indexPRETA.htm>

He creates a new meaning, and enriches the relation with the host. The presence of the parasite adds a new dimension to the natural habitat of the host, and therefore opens new possibilities for relations. Serres' line of thinking invites us to reconsider who is the host and who is the parasite. It could be the one seen as the parasite, who provides the one seen as the host, with new meanings and information, and it could therefore be the host making use of the new input of the parasite. The host thus becomes a parasite in his/her own way, and the parasite becomes the one making a contribution. In every social relation this complex interplay between abuse and contribution takes place. According to Serres, such exchanges of the parasite transform the world and makes social relations work.

Changes occur, then, because of parasites. They change the meaning of social relations and communication systems. In this sense protesters, who are involved in movements like Occupy, operate like parasites. They initiate change, not by succeeding in having all their demands for social change realized, but by making the system, against which they protest, falter. By disturbing the daily course of events in the city, and by defying existing rules and authorities, they produce a noise and interfere in regular communications. They force the existing system to malfunction, and at the same time open possibilities to imagine new forms of communication, and social relations. In this sense they disturb and produce at the same time. If there were no parasites, the entire functioning of communication would collapse. According to Serres, a third element, which both forms a channel and interferes between communicating partners, is essential to communication. It is the noise which is produced in this channel, the difference between what is said and what is perceived, that makes communication. Or, in his words:

Systems work because they do not work. Nonfunctioning remains essential for functioning. (2007: 79)

The parasite relation is supported and reinforced by commodities, which also change their meaning. As in the case of the Guy Fawkes mask, a marketing commodity changes into an instrument of revolt, or as Serres would put it, into a quasi-object. The commodity is after all a thing that has value in an exchange market. However, by the parasitic exchange it receives a different value. In the use of the commodity, people are brought together for different purposes, enabling them to express a different subjectivity, and exchange different values, which can contradict the neoliberal, capitalist ideology behind the market. 'This quasi-object, when being passed, makes the collective, if it stops, it makes the individual' (2007: 225). A quasi-object defines a subject, it gives the bearer a

meaning in the act of exchange. Serres uses the example of the ball in rugby; the ball defines who is playing, who is passing it.

This quasi-object that is a marker of the subject is an astonishing constructor of subjectivity. We know, through it, how and when we are subjects and when and how we are no longer subjects. (2007: 227)

In a similar way, a mask can make us anonymous protesters. It can make us part of a collective subjectivity with revolutionary intentions, a swarm intelligence challenging the established world order. What will be the outcome of these parasitical shifts is anyone's guess. Perhaps, in order to reach wider markets, the logic of capitalism is able, through its parasites, to transform itself into its opposite. Perhaps the 99 % will forge a more radical transformation, and capitalism will finally exhaust itself.

If the mask could speak, it might give us the answer.....

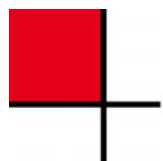
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Commodity fights in Post-2008 Athens: Zapatistas coffee, Kropotkinian drinks and Fascist rice

Andreas Chatzidakis

Every given commodity fights for itself, cannot acknowledge the others, and attempts to impose itself everywhere as if it were the only one... (Debord, 1967: 66)

In this short commentary, I address Shukaitis' questions by drawing inspiration from the 'commodity fights' witnessed during an ongoing ethnography of a city in ultimate socio-cultural and economic transition: Athens. I will try to illustrate that behind the unprecedented reconfiguration of the Athenian public space and way of living past 2008, from newly established 'migrant-free' and 'fascist-free' zones (Vradis and Dalakoglou, 2010) to solidarity trading initiatives and soup kitchens, lies both an emerging shift in the socio-economic structures of production and consumption and a more implicit shift in the understanding of its material culture. In contemporary Athenian agoras, people not only listen to commodities talk but also watch them *do* it: it is as if commodities are now part of a battlefield in which nonhuman objects fight along with humans for their own right to the city (Lefebvre, 1991). As this commentary will demonstrate, these nonhuman comrades have political attributes (e.g. 'Kropotkinian drinks'), contribute to economies of solidarity and de-commodification (e.g. Zapatistas coffee) and assist in riots (e.g. 'climax full face masks').

The Athenian spectacle

In December 2008, Athens entered a new chapter in its long and tormented history. The capitalist spectacle of the early-mid 2000s – comprising of

development frenzy, supersized shopping malls and patriotic achievements of Olympic proportions (from being the dark horse winner in international sports competitions to hosting Athens 2004) – gave way to the December 2008 riots and the most severe, ongoing economic crisis since Greece's restoration of democracy in 1974. For some, however, a deeper socio-cultural crisis pre-existed. The 2008 Athens uprising helped uncover struggles and contradictions that injected the Greek antagonist movement with newly-found confidence (e.g. Vradis and Dalakoglou, 2011). Within Exarcheia, the city's traditional core of intellectual and political activity, various grassroots movements and collectives started experimenting with here-and-now politics such as solidarity trading with Zapatistas and like-minded local producers, various squats of private and public spaces (including guerrilla parks), new producer and consumer co-operatives, anti-consumerist bazaars, collective kitchens, no-ticket cinema screenings, among others. Spaces of rupture and cracks in the capitalist system (Holloway, 2010) began to appear everywhere.

Fast forward three and a half years, the notions of solidarity trading, linking consumers with producers without intermediaries and resident assemblies on the basis of anti-hierarchical structuring and self-management are now part of the collective vocabulary and have spread far outside Exarcheia (nearly) as fast as the December riots. In this emerging discourse, commodities are an indispensable part of social and political struggles and as I illustrate below, they have assumed various comradely and not-so comradely dimensions.

Zapatistas coffee and Kropotkinian drinks

It seemed the perfect neighbourhood to me...here you can do many of the things you generally do but from within 'the movement': you can have your coffee in a collective, you can buy some food stuff from Sporos, you can hang around and have a good debate in the park, you can get your clothes from Skoros. Not as if that includes literally everything you do – I wish – but slowly there is a tendency towards this direction and I do not think you can find this anywhere else...much of your daily life is politicised. (Male, 33)

Exarcheia is a central neighbourhood of Athens that is renowned for its radical intellectual and political history. Described, among others, as the world's only 'anarchist neighbourhood' (Vradis and Dalakoglou, 2011), Exarcheia has been the birthplace of the Athens Polytechnic uprising (November 1973), the December 2008 riots and is the heart of various other protests and forms of anti-capitalist action since the arrival in the country of the so-called troika (EU/IMF/ECB). Nonetheless, it was not until the 2008 uprising that various Exarcheia-based



Figure 1: Exarcheia's park.

grassroots collectives and movements began to experiment in a larger scale and more consistently with various forms of here-and-now politics and creative forms of resistance. For instance, one of the most striking manifestations is a guerrilla park (formerly a parking lot) known as 'Park Navarinou' or 'the park', that was created in the aftermath of the 2008 riots in an attempt to give something positive to the community and provide a public space that operates on the basis of self-management, anti-hierarchical structures and anti-commercialisation. Today, having established its spatial legacy, along with some impressive



Figure 2: Exarcheia's park.

vegetation, the park continues to function as a space that defies commodification, whilst hosting a variety of different events (from no-ticket cinema screenings to anti-consumerist bazaars), and opportunities for political and comradely cultivation.

Other movements aim at addressing the salience of commodity objects more directly. For instance ‘Sporos’ (Greek for ‘seed’), one of the few such collectives that pre-existed the riots, aims at providing an economy of solidarity with Zapatistas and related producer co-operatives. Concurrently, members of Sporos’s collective aim at cultivating an active consumer ethos that confronts more mainstream conceptions of ‘ethical consumers’ who simply satisfy their ‘guilt fetishes’ (Cremin, 2012) through purchases of fair trade products (mostly at supermarket shelves):

we do not see it as a method to ‘help the poor’ in the developing countries, but rather as a possible social movement, comprised of horizontal networks of organized producers, distribution groups and active consumers. We see this possible movement as part of the broader global struggle for social change, not as a thematic action unconnected to the general social and political issues. (<http://sporos.org/en>)

Since Sporos’s successful establishment in the area, various other collectives attempted their own versions of solidarity trading initiatives, gifting bazaars, time banks, barter economies, collective cooking events, free cinema screenings, theatrical plays, artistic exhibitions and educational courses, among others, providing the area with an unprecedented number of opportunities for everyday radical action. And yet, for most of them, the possibility of creating yet another layer of commodified politics remains a constant problematisation:

there is a saying that capitalism can sell you the rope that is about to hang you, capitalism has the ability to commercialise and commodify everything, even resistance....so we remain conscious that even the smallest, most benign activities, say collective cooking, need first, to have a political rationale and second, to be seen in the context of broader social and class struggles... (male, 40)



Figure 3: Zapatistas Coffee
(<http://www.sporos.org/products>).

Indeed such problematisations are commonplace within Exarcheia and they often translate into extensive debates, for instance, how, by ensuring social welfare provision in a period of extreme neoliberalisation, solidarity trading initiatives risk serving a complementary-reformist rather than antagonistic role, or the possibility of the area itself to become exoticised and commodified into a Disneyland for ‘anarcho-tourists’.

Exarcheia, nonetheless, is not an autonomous zone. It remains a neighbourhood in an (otherwise) capitalist city and the dynamic between Exarcheia and the rest of Athens (and Greece) continues to shift dramatically. Previously an area of 'explosion', during the 2008 riots and more discretely through the exportation of self-management principles and here-and-now politics in other areas, Exarcheia is now experiencing an 'implosion', in the sense that a deepening systemic crisis is now abruptly and violently applied upon its residents as much as anywhere else in the country (Chatzidakis and Vradis, 2011). Stories of increased violence, drug-trafficking, and people nearing and falling below the poverty line are part of the new (dystopian) reality. As a consequence, many of the established collectives have had to reconsider their scope and mission. For instance Skoros, a very successful anti-consumerist collective that provides a permanent space for the exchange of goods and services without attached norms of reciprocity has had to reconsider its 'anti-consumerist' agenda:

When we started Skoros, three years ago...everything was easier. It was much easier to propose anti-consumerism, re-use, recycling and sharing practices. Later however the economic crisis arrived – of course the social and cultural crises pre-existed – and made us feel awkward. How can one speak of anti-consumerism when people's spending power has shrunk considerably? How can one propose a critique of consumerist needs when people struggle to meet their basic needs? How can we insist that 'we are not a charity' when poverty is next to us, around and above us and it is growing massively? How to counterpropose solidarity and community when the crisis isolates individuals and makes them turn against each other? ...Nonetheless, we are definitely not mourning the loss of our spending power. Our wardrobes may not be as full so as to be able to get rid of last season's clothes and rush for their renewal but how many things do we really need? We are part of a broader network of resistance and struggle but we do not aim for the previous situation: the exploitation, uneven growth, environmental degradation and constant nightmare of unfulfilled consumer needs... (Published leaflet, December 2011).

Concurrently, new cracks emerge in what could be the most unexpected moments and places. 'Vox Squatted Social Centre', previously a cafe/bookstore attached to a cinema, is now a squat run by more traditional anarchist groups that had so far kept a less public profile in the area and were against engaging in any form of monetised transactions. Perhaps the systemic crisis has imposed a reconsideration of their approach to here-and-now politics but the somewhat 'Kropotkinian' drinks sold in Vox do retain a solid comradesly mission: all money (so far a few thousands euros) goes in support of anarchist comrades that face juridical charges and/or are already in jail.



Figure 4: Vox squatted social centre.¹

Greek-only soup kitchens, solidarity trading from-Greeks-for-Greeks and Fascist rice

In post 2008 Athens, however, like many other terms and ideas that have been historically associated with the left (such as solidarity and self-management), the word comrade has been reinvented by a variety of groups at the other end of the political spectrum. In particular, the rise of Golden Dawn, a political party with explicit links to neo-Nazi ideology and which it won 7% of votes in the last national elections (July 2012), has responded not only through practising its own spatial politics via the creation of migrant-free zones (Vradis and Dalakoglou, 2010) but also through counter-proposing its own version of ‘comradely’ activities and objects; such as solidarity trading that is ‘from-Greeks-for-Greeks’, soup kitchens upon proof of (Greek) national identity card and ‘security services’ such as walks to ATMs for citizens that are concerned by the rise of migrant-led crime. And yet, commodities do travel and they often break their silence about the conditions of their production.

‘Fascist rice’ is a term used across various solidarity trading networks when it was revealed that the producers’ co-operative of the particular rice were affiliated with extreme-right groups and organisations. Subsequently, the rice was

¹ Source: http://www.anarkismo.net/attachments/apr2012/473188_423853804308583_143534732340493_1534631_437263738-0.jpg

withdrawn from networks with a more explicitly radical agenda. This is a battle fought not only at the level of colonising particular words and ideas but also at the actual material and social conditions in which commodities are produced and acquire their meaning.

Human and nonhuman comrades

The case of post 2008 Athens opens up the question of nonhuman objects as comrades at three distinct levels.

First, commodities can certainly be attributed comradely and not-so comradely qualities. In a period of severe economic crisis and increased polarisation of political views and actions, humans' tendency to apply ingroup-outgroup distinctions and to project negative and positive attributes to others is perhaps less escapable – in line with various psychoanalytical traditions (e.g. Rustin, 2010) – and may apply equally to human and nonhuman objects. Commodities such as rice, for instance, are anthropomorphised ('fascist') and avoided at any cost regardless of what the particular rice does (or not) in people's stomachs. Concurrently, suspicions about the conditions of its production aside, fascist rice emerges as a commodity invested with a new layer of fetish, as in the case of fair trade (Cremin, 2012, Lyon 2006) and Soviet products (Kravets, this issue). Yet, the 'phantasmic' outcome mirrors a battlefield played out in the streets rather than an imagined dialogue between consumers and advertising agencies or artists and state planners.

In post 2008 Athens, objects are caught in an urban struggle where 'who gets there first' – despite questions of historical and political legitimacy – *whose* phantasy is the object (solidarity rice, collective kitchens etc.) associated with is the ultimate trophy. This is a fight which is not very different from the fights taken in the streets for territorial-spatial legacy, indeed it is about urban space (Lefebvre, 1991) as well as the objects *in* space (e.g. from fascist-free zones to fascist-free products). In the end, by demarcating fascist rice from economies and products of (universal) solidarity, the Greek antagonist movement claims its traditional territorial rights both in a tangible and a more intangible, phantasmic realm.

Second, for various solidarity trading initiatives and collaborations between producer and consumer groups, the aim has been to de-fetishise objects and turn them into comrades at a more actual-material base:

the real question is not simply to provide solidarity and link producers with consumers but also to question which producers, what products, why, produced under what conditions. (female informant, 32)

Of course, the extent to which such movements can take place within a capitalist system remains a problematisation:

they should not have illusions that they can progress outside the system, that they can grow and overturn it without confrontation...if tomorrow the project of bypassing intermediaries carries on and extends massively, the system will respond, because it loses taxes through this [solidarity trading]. And not only taxes. More importantly, an autonomous society emerges, standing across the capitalist system and the market. And this won't be left without a response... (male, 40)

Third, some commodities may be comradely not for their intrinsic value or what they say when/if they talk (Shukaitis, this issue) but for their instrumental value, or what they otherwise *do*. Kropotkinian drinks may be as fetishised as the drinks sold in a fancy cocktail bar but they do serve a distinct, comradely mission: to assist in radical action. Another such commodity that is popular among some Exarcheia-based groups is the 'climax full face mask' or the protester's mask of choice: some wearers of the mask have in the past displayed the price tag and retailer's address to pre-empt questions from other comrades and assist them in gaining access.



Figure 5: Climax full face mask. (<http://www.sis-lebanon.com/catalog/mask/full-face-mask>).

At the time of writing various collectives, such as Sporos, have broken up (July 2012; although Zapatistas coffee is still supplied via a sister co-operative) whereas others begin to emerge such as the creation of a bigger 'time bank' (network for

sharing goods and services) that aims to co-ordinate various smaller-scale groups and initiatives within Exarcheia. Concurrently, an increasingly dominant narrative across conventional media and pro-establishment actors depicts the variety of urban struggles and grassroots interventions as part of an ongoing affair between the ‘extremes’, left and right. This ideological reshuffle serves to distantiate all radical action from the interests of the ‘extreme centre’², whilst totalising and dismissing the differences between Golden Dawn and the Greek antagonist movement – despite for instance, Golden Dawn’s neo-Nazi ideology, accusations of murdering, and use of explicitly racist and sexist practices³. The battlefield is still played out and many nonhuman comrades may soon realise they will have to become ‘full-time’ comrades and ‘parts of’ rather than ‘members in’ the antagonist movement, as many of their human counterparts have already done.

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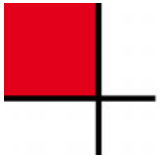
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3 See e.g. <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/laurie-penny-its-not-rhetoric-to-draw-parallels-with-nazism-8092591.html>;
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Irish utopian realism?

Gavin Brown and Angus Cameron

review of

NAMALab (2011) *NAMALab*. Dublin School of Architecture Press: Dublin. (HB, pp. 215, €20.00, ISBN 978-0956850225)

Following the banking crisis of 2008, which hit the Irish economy particularly hard, the Irish government created an organisation to ‘warehouse’ some of the country’s more troubled building developments – primarily in Dublin. The National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) became the dumping ground for Ireland’s large pool of urban toxic debt. This took the concrete form of a series of buildings in various states of completion and/or disrepair to be ‘managed’ by the state. In practice this means holding onto them, preventing them from falling down or being squatted and eventually selling them off to recoup as much of the lost capital as possible. Similar schemes have been used in other countries (USA, Spain, Greece, etc.) in an effort to prevent large scale bankruptcies, protect strategic sites and generally to prevent urban decay. Not all such countries, however, have an equivalent of NAMALab.

Entirely unrelated to NAMA itself, NAMALab is an ‘architectural and urban research unit’ established jointly by the Dublin School of Architecture and the Dublin Institute of Technology in 2010. Created originally as a vehicle for final year architecture students, NAMALab grew into something more akin to an urban political movement – a bold attempt to (literally) redesign the responsibilities of the state in the interests of the Irish people. The book

reviewed here records the history and outputs of NAMALab during its brief, but productive and provocative existence.

NAMALab's mission was at one level very simple: whilst all these buildings are in state hands, put them to good use rather than simply leaving them empty. More than that, however, NAMALab also sought to engage the public's imagination in the process of urban reinvention – democratising both architecture as a collective public practice but also the Irish state's response to the financial crisis. As such, NAMALab wrote a manifesto that goes far beyond a few interesting architectural projects. The manifesto consists of five statements (12-13):

- 1 – to make the spatial reality of NAMA transparent to the public,
- 2 – to present information in order to stimulate debate for a broader social change in Ireland,
- 3 – to look beyond the economic value of NAMA's assets,
- 4 – to design alternative propositions for these sites that will benefit society,
- 5 – to declare that Architecture can no longer be slave to short term speculation.

That architecture students should place their own discipline on this list might be expected. However, this also places NAMALab – clearly knowingly – in a long tradition of visionary and campaigning architectural and urban planning theory – from the early garden cities movement, through the likes of the Bauhaus and Le Corbusier, to the advocates of the post-modern urban forms. Unlike these earlier movements, however, NAMALab addressed a very real and imminent urban problem rather than an exercise in blue-skies urban thinking. And because of the scale of the problem (NAMA's assets in 2010 were valued at €72.3 billion) and the significance of Dublin to the Irish economy as a whole, NAMALab's architectural intervention in the city was simultaneously an intervention in the national political economy of Ireland.

Despite this, at one level, NAMALab could be read as no more than a local thought experiment – an interesting and timely, but ultimately futile tilt at the narrow-minded bureaucracies of the Irish state. The casual way in which NAMA itself seems to have completely ignored NAMALab certainly suggests that the project lacked political purchase. But bigger questions remain. Whatever its fate in Dublin, does this model of architecture-led social redevelopment have possibilities elsewhere? Can the narrow cast of urban value – market-based real estate and nothing else – be broadened as their manifesto suggests? Does this really represent a different way of thinking about the urban economy?

The NAMALab portfolio showcases proposals for the renovation of buildings in seven areas of Dublin, ranging from the city's retail and business core, through areas where earlier urban regeneration initiatives had failed or stalled, to the inner suburbs and satellite towns. The designs propose an eclectic mix of residential developments, business premises and community resources of various kinds. Most respond to the imagined needs of the city and its population in a time of austerity; while a minority appear to yearn for the heyday of the Celtic Tiger and propose 'business as usual' solutions. There are competing utopian visions at work here; and, between them, the proposed architectural interventions draw on different aspects of Irish politics and culture, past and present.

Elizabeth Gaynor proposes a 'community house' between the heavily gentrified area of Smithfield and the more established, socially mixed communities of Stoneybatter and Grangegorman. Her vision is for a meeting place, a site of informal education, where these diverse communities can interact and learn from each other to devise strategies for inclusive social progress. This facility, mixing student accommodation, a coffee shop, and after-school clubs appears to owe a debt to older traditions of religious urban settlements, just as it looks to the future.

A very different vision is offered by Wendy Adams' proposal for a 'house of entrepreneurship'. Responding to growing unemployment in Ireland, and acknowledging a trend towards self-employment as a response to redundancy, she designed a 'one-stop stop' for business incubation. Although clearly intended as a practical response to the hardships of austerity, this proposal seems to still be framed by the individualised aspirations of the boom years.

In contrast, Teresa Carro's proposal for a new 'ethnic market' on the least prosperous stretch of O'Connell Street relies on a different economic model. She envisions a cooperatively run space bringing together small traders from different cultures. This proposal seeks to acknowledge, celebrate and capitalise on the increasingly diverse populations that were attracted to Dublin during the boom. She too seeks to foster a space of interaction and encounter across social difference, and relies on the cooperative model in the hope that this allows competing interests to be held in balance.

Some of the most playfully critical proposals amongst the NAMALab portfolio are those that imagine new uses for sites in the Dublin Docklands, a symbol of the pretensions of the property boom. The unfinished shell of the intended new headquarters of the Allied Irish Bank is turned into a public art gallery displaying the substantial art collections of major corporations in Paul O'Sullivan's

imagination. Kenny Ward seeks to make the Docklands productive in new ways by turning the Grand Canal Dock into an urban trout farm.

Ward is not alone in seeking to foster productive urban agriculture and stimulate local food production within the city. There are proposals for urban farms and community gardens integrated into other developments. In contrast to the excessive consumption of the boom years, several architects prioritise the development of new, multi-purpose facilities for recycling. The linear temporalities of accumulation are reworked in these proposals in ways that reimagine the focus of the Irish economy and its relationship to the consumption of natural resources. Two projects proposed for Dublin Bay seek to foster new relationships with the local environment in other ways. Rachel Cribbin's design for Booterstown Marsh encourages the city's inhabitants to slow down and appreciate the fragility of this marshland environment and the rhythms of the migratory birdlife that gathers there twice a year. On the north shore of the bay, Breffni Greene imagines means of revitalising the Dublin tradition of sea baths from the late 1800s with a new series of saltwater bathing pools at Clontarf.

As all this variety suggests, NAMALab's experimentalism tends to run counter to any more unified vision of what a revitalised Dublin might be. Both the individual projects and the book cataloguing them carry a similar tension – are we trying to restore a lost prosperity in interesting ways, or are we looking to go in a different, more inclusive and more sustainable direction altogether? It would, of course, be ridiculous to expect a student project to resolve such a question – even one as enterprising as this and with considerable academic and other support. And if NAMALab have not found a solution, at the very least they have posed the question in a more interesting, incisive and public way. They are not the first to have done so – as noted above there have been other architecture-led redevelopment projects. But at a time when the future direction of many Eurozone states is in question, as indeed is capitalism itself, NAMALab's cautious urban utopianism is an important reminder that there are more imaginative possibilities than simply 'business as usual'. The failure of the Irish state – in the form of NAMA itself – to even engage with, let alone support, NAMALab speaks volumes about the signal lack of imagination in government.

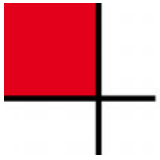
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Consumption and its contradictions: Dialogues on the causes of buying

Georgios Patsiaouras

review of

Miller, D. (2012) *Consumption and its Consequences*. Polity Press: London. (PB, pp. 200, £15.99, ISBN 978-0745661087)

Daniel Miller is Professor in Material Culture at the Department of Anthropology, University of Central London. Since the mid-1980s he has been a central figure in discussions and debates around consumption. Miller's predominantly ethnographic work has been a seminal series of explorations into the implications of mass consumption on human relationships, collective identity and behaviour (Miller, 1987), the commercial success of Christmas as a global event (Miller, 1993), cross-disciplinary discussions on the nature of consumption (Miller, 1995) and theories of shopping (Miller, 1998). His more recent work demonstrates the complexity of consumption practices, material culture and materiality in relation to the (social) media, convincingly demonstrating how commodities and objects define interpersonal relationships (Miller, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2011).

Initially trained as an archaeologist, Miller's broad body of work also draws on domestic design theory, sociology, Hegelian, Marxist and Simmelian accounts of consumption, continental philosophy and marketing theory, as well as a variety of additional disparate fields. His recent *Stuff* (2010) combined such diverse traditions in order to develop a general theory of social relationships mediated by the presence of things. The publication of this new book, the focus of the present

review, will come as little surprise, then, to those who have followed the development of Miller's thinking, not least of all because it is offered as a sequel to *Stuff*. Here I examine whether and to what extent *Consumption and its Consequences* accounts for what consumption is and for why individuals consume, as it sets out to do.

The book cover depicts a miniature of the globe carried by two hands in a supermarket trolley and evokes the cover of the English edition of Baudrillard's *Consumer Society* (1998). Within the prologue, Miller provides a succinct account of his educational background and training as a qualitative fieldworker whilst expressing, in a few semi-polemical sentences, his growing scepticism towards the application of quantitative and experimental research methods within the humanities and the social sciences. This follows a brief auto-biographical narrative of Miller's introduction to politics, from his early readings and ideological affiliation to Marxism right up to his contemporary trust and faith within the ideals of social-democracy Norway, Miller argues, constitutes the role-model. His advocacy of the 'Nordic Model' is immediately followed by his assertion

that the world has consistently improved in terms of welfare of most of its populations and there are good reasons for thinking it will continue to do so. (8)

Miller acknowledges that such an angle might be unpopular. What the reader is also left with, however, is a large question mark over whether and how he might discuss the collapse of the Western banking system and its consequences not only upon individual or collective consumption but also on public expenditure, welfare and social inequality. I will return to this point below.

The structure of the book, comprised of six chapters, offers a welcome break from conventional textbook accounts of consumer behaviour and consumption in general. The first and final chapters are presented as dialogues between three fictional characters whose views, opinions and beliefs represent different political perspectives. Introducing and discussing the consequences of consumption through lively dialogues, argumentation and opposing views, Miller attempts to update and refresh his previous writing and research findings - presented in *Stuff* and elsewhere - with the views of three seemingly distinct or semi-autonomous ideological camps. The middle chapters of the book summarise research which he has conducted, published and discussed over the last twenty years. Readers already familiar with Miller's ideas might hesitate to revisit his previously published findings on consumption, shopping and material culture. Others will find the opportunity to introduce themselves to Miller's prolific work on consumption and consumer society infused with political overtones.

In Chapter 1, the three characters embark upon a conversation in a comfortable North London house. Mike, a middle-aged professor of environmental studies represents the green perspective. Chris, a senior lecturer in sociology, voices the left of the political spectrum. Grace, raised in the Philippines, works as a lecturer in anthropology and brings forward her experiences as a fieldworker exposed to poverty. Having met in a conference, they decide to exchange, compare and update generic views about consumption, politics and climate change. Mike's green call for immediate and sustained reduction in consumption and the development of ecological consciousness opens the dialogue by highlighting the variety of opposing views which exist amongst environmentalists. Subsequently, the dialogue is almost monopolized by Grace's personal experiences which contrast her impoverished upbringing in the Philippines to her later exposure to the lifestyle of the contemporary affluent middle-income Londoner. Through the vehicle of Grace's torrential monologue, Miller brings together issues around immigration, class consumption, education and conspicuousness by emphasizing the striking contradiction between Western consumers' preoccupation with a 'more is better' ideology, on the one hand, and the dramatic lack of basic goods, health and public services in developing countries, on the other.

Miller turns this fierce debate into a simultaneous critique of [primarily] environmentalists' and critical sociologists' reluctance to study and embrace the contribution of anthropology to the cross-cultural study of material culture and symbolic consumption, implying that both perspectives repeat, recycle and perpetuate the same universalistic and generic arguments and critiques regarding consumerism, green commodities, moral values and mass consumption. Chris, the sociologist, righteously acknowledges that Grace's personal disposition and emotional involvement has overshadowed her accounts of the importance of anthropological research and so responds to her polemic with his own long monologue. For Chris, the critique of consumption is tied to a concern with the display of social position - references to Veblen, Bourdieu and Mary Douglas abound throughout. The dialogue reaches its zenith with a humorous argument about whether Bourdieu can be classified as an anthropologist or a sociologist. Skilfully, Miller changes the parameters of the debate and directs the discussion towards the interrelationships between national and cultural differences regarding happiness, health, well-being and quantifiable aspects of welfare.

With only two surface references to the 2011 welfare cut of the UK coalition government and the 2007/2008 global financial crisis, the discussion fluctuates between the global connections and contradictions amongst affluence, consumption, poverty and underdevelopment. Grace dominates the discussion,

highlighting that instead of galvanizing a thorough and one-dimensional critique of capitalism, the welfare and market-driven social democratic regimes of Scandinavian countries can represent good examples of providing high standards of living together with increased levels of consumption. The three protagonists agree to read a draft of a forthcoming book that summarizes ethnographic research on consumption – the following five chapters – and in the next meeting (staged during the book's final chapter) they will further elaborate on the consequences of consumption from a suitably enlightened perspective. Such is the set-up.

The all-important first chapter, then, is enjoyable, intellectually stimulating and even entertaining. At the same time it is somewhat biased towards the author's own political and professional background. The environmentalist perspective is quickly marginalized by the posturing debate between the anthropological tradition and critical sociology. This argument paves the way, in turn, towards the mutual recognition of the possibility of a synthesis of a market-driven economy with an egalitarian social welfare system. The reader can easily self-identify with one of the characters – as the author does – however Miller has already set the directions for the search for a pragmatic and ideal political solution prescribed and defined by specific economic beliefs and particular/regional-based social values.

Chapter 2, 'Consumer Society', as already mentioned, is a summary of Miller's previous ethnographic work which he has published throughout the last fifteen years (Miller, 1987; 1994; 1997). Examining the cultural, economic and social aspects of Trinidad's metamorphosis into a consumer society, Miller highlights the importance of symbolic consumption as a means of displaying the values of a society and the spread of metropolitan consumer culture icons (the case study focuses on the Coca Cola brand) into vehicles of global homogenization. It also discusses how the citizens of Trinidad reacted to the erosion of their culture by the emergent materialist consumer culture. Attempting to compress, present and discuss rich ethnographic data into a single chapter, however, Miller ends up referring to so many themes and concepts - from labour and alienation to education and from time and the sacralisation of consumption to the concept of objectification - without offering the essential depth that will demonstrate their interconnectedness and importance for the structuring of consumption practices and actions.

Chapter 3, then, is heavily based on Miller's own reflections on more of his earlier work: *Dialectics of shopping* (2001) and a *Theory of shopping* (1998). Travelling from Trinidad to the streets of North London, the author spent a year observing and interpreting shopping as a social and active process, offering an

alternative angle to representations of consumption as individualistic, hedonistic and materialistic. The analysis draws from cultural anthropology and focuses on household, paternal and family relationships, as well as issues and discussions around gender, ethnicity and social class. Miller oscillates between the normative and actual dimensions of purchasing decisions, underlining the role of expectations, conformity and compromise in justifying how material culture objectifies norms. The chapter could have done with more references to sociological, consumer research and psychological literatures.

Chapter 4 revisits the 'Global Denim Project' which sought to focus on one particular consumer object - denim blue jeans - and account for why so many people around the world wear them. Themes around globalization and ubiquity, anxiety and maintenance of individual personhood come into play here as Miller brings the reader from socialist Hungary to Brazil and back again to London. Placing less emphasis on theories of social, status-driven and cultural differentiation through consumption, Miller instead elaborates on a post-semiotic perspective by highlighting the ordinary, mundane and comfort-related aspects of wearing a pair of jeans as a means of escaping from, rather than embracing and conforming to, a particular identity or consumption lifestyle. The methodological challenges of ethnographic data collection and interpretation here overshadow the underlying debate over whether connotations of assimilation, distinction or the pursuit of the objectification of a state of ordinariness drive the purchase and public display of jeans. References to Veblen, Bourdieu, Barthes and Baudrillard, which appear in the concluding paragraph, could have been further discussed and better integrated across the chapter.

Throughout Chapter 5, Miller suggests that we can view and potentially discuss political economy more as a consequence than as a cause of consumption. He discusses previous research findings about globalization and localization, as well as the dialectical antagonism or contradiction between the effectiveness of local and culturally constructed adverts versus the success of global brands. However, Miller's generic proposition that the advertising industry is primarily effective only at creating demand to satisfy children's needs, wants and desires sounds limited and one-dimensional. Questioning and refuting the epistemological limitations and assumptions of mainstream and orthodox economic theories around consumer demand and supply, although a high level of overgeneralization is acknowledged, Miller continues to develop an inconspicuous exercise which seems to permeate, characterize and gradually govern his book, chapter by chapter: an attempt to underline the originality and qualities of ethnographic studies of commerce and material culture compared to some limitations of social, cultural and economic readings of consumption.

Some updated references on the contemporary rhetoric and discourse of economics and finance, such as Michael Lewis' classic *Liar's poker* (2006), support Miller's belief on the inherent 'stupidity' of free-market economic doctrines, which turns into a vehicle for re-introducing the author's advocacy for a socially democratic system that embraces capitalism through the retention of strict control upon its social consequences. Miller concludes the chapter with suggestions such as

an education which focuses on examples of how to use economic instruments for securing the welfare of populations (138)

and

a qualitative engagement with the specifics of actual people and their welfare concerns (137)

in order to reinvigorate the implementation and maintenance of combined economic efficiency with welfare state benefits. It is beyond the scope of this review to examine, assess and discuss whether the 'regional' Nordic model constitutes a politico-ideological artefact, a viable gigantic plan, or a provisional utopia. Miller's affiliation with Scandinavian social democracy, for its part, could be supported by highlighting the complexity arising from the amalgamation of norms, institutional status quos and economic processes so as to support the spread of a Nordic style social citizenship and provision of goods across the globe.

The final chapter returns to the conversation about the consequences of consumption. A skilful writer, Miller also here acknowledges some of the limitations in his book – such as its lack of a voice for left-wing critiques of market capitalism and consumerism – and structures the closing discussion around the aspects and potentialities of education as a means of transforming consumers' consciousness, the increase in the consumption of green goods, and government policies for innovative carbon markets. The regulation of industries, the problem of over-production and the critique of mainstream economic theory also come into play here.

For readers interested in anthropological aspects of consumption in general and Miller's previous ethnographic studies in particular, then, this book offers an intriguing introduction which seeks to contextualize the consequences of consumption between debates regarding the wider political economy and climate change. Nevertheless, Miller's hyperbolic emphasis on cultural and anthropological insights of consumption practices, as well as his focus on household provisioning, doesn't justify or sufficiently corroborate his critique of

theorists who have emphasized the role of advertising, status emulation, lifestyle conformity and imitation as some of the driving forces behind materialism, overconsumption, class and social inequality. The hypothesis that the abolition of advertising practices or the reduction of class differences would decrease consumer inequality, for example, is a monstrous theoretical assumption which cannot be tested in a single study. The presentation and discussion of the richness and diversity of cultural consumption practices, and the symbolic function of material things, could also be comprehended in a *synergistic* rather than antithetical relationship with, let's say, Veblenesque interpretations of consumer demand so as to fulfil Miller's call for the alleviation of poverty and deprivation. The need to apply and critically engage with ethnographic methods and techniques to the study of modern commerce, finance and retailing also seems rather indispensable. Miller's invitation to consider a dichotomy between the causes of consumption and the consequences of capitalism(s) (or vice-versa if you want), or to adopt and if possibly emulate the fairness, regulation and virtues of social-democratic politics, however, seems ambiguous.

Keynes' encouragement of higher consumption during times of depression has been met with some degree of contemporary encouragement. As Miller argues, we can't deny consumption's contribution to the advancement of welfare. To stimulate consumption, however, is also to stimulate the complex interplay between banking and government policies for home-ownership and credit – relationships which triggered the global recession and disclosed financial markets' insatiable lust. Concurring with Miller, then, we can say that naïve and unsophisticated thinking on how we can remove the causes of consumption leads nowhere. So, by analysing the adverse causes of competitive consumption: obesity, vanity, compulsive buying and wasteful consumption of natural resources amongst others, we might begin to comprehend how to tackle them. A soft, productive, regulated, flexible and highly dynamic version of capitalism that aims to enhance the civic sphere, welfare provision and human rights might represent the embodiment of universal values and perhaps a pragmatic model of free trading moralism with ecological consciousness. Nevertheless, the internationalization of Protestant missionary zeal and socialist harmony seems inconsistent with the presence of tough militarism, oppression, corrupted economic elites and policy-planning networks which occur away from the boundaries of a Nordic geographic periphery. Miller righteously highlights the centrality of our education system and the potential contribution of heterodox economic theories for the cultivation of ethical concerns and a sustainable environment. Such themes could infuse and update his ethnographic data with newly introduced concepts so as to strike a balance between the consequences of consumption, moral adjudication, and the adoption of a particular political stance.

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