



Call for Papers for an *ephemera* Special Issue on:

## Re-thinking the Politics of Consumption

Issue Editors: Alan Bradshaw and Stephen Dunne

The recent explosion in student and popular protests around the world refutes the neo-liberal hypothesis of consumption as a matter of human capital machines maximising their utility from within the confines of an already existing political-economic configuration. Cracks are now appearing in the smile of the self-satisfied ‘happiness machine’. The market as a-moral proposition no longer holds sway. The consuming subject can no longer happily reconcile itself to its status as consumer and consumer alone. Today, the very act of consumption shows itself as something extra-individual, as something beyond particular interests, as something pertaining to the very nature of the social bond - in short, as something inherently political. Whether and to what extent there might be reason to again consider the possibilities and pitfalls of a politics of consumption is the guiding question which we would like to ask contributors to engage with here.

We say *again*, of course, in order to acknowledge something potentially retrogressive in raising a call for papers on the basis of just this sort of question. Classical Marxism, after all, had long ago offered at least four bases upon which a critique of consumption might be grounded: an alienated activity in an alienated world, production’s mirror image within labour’s moments of subsistence, a fetishistic endeavour approximating commodity misrecognition, and/or capitalism’s systemic reproduction across ever more dispersed but fundamentally inter-related circuits. Classical Marxism, at least in these reductive senses, invites us to think consumption as something approximating the *epiphenomenal*. Yes, consumption is an important component within capitalist social relations. But a critique of political economy cannot simply be reduced to a critique of consumption. Yes, consumption matters. But on the question of first and last things, it doesn’t seem to matter quite as much as production does.

This, of course, has not been Marxism’s final word on the matter. Nor can it be. Nor will it be here. As Ernest Mandel’s *Late Capitalism* (1998) famously illustrates, the object of Marx’s *Capital*, Industrial Capitalism, has itself evolved quite fundamentally since his time. The reality of late capitalism therefore requires a new critique of political economy – one which would be capable of accounting for a largely post-industrialist capitalism wherein the figure of the consumer becomes increasingly important. Fredric Jameson also insists that this need to confront capitalism’s new instantiations, of which consumerism is an undoubtedly central aspect, was the general project which the Frankfurt School Critical Theorists, the French ‘post-Marxists’ and the Critical Aestheticians of their day collectively inherited (1984). This ongoing project has hardly been silenced underneath the warp and woof of today’s increasingly virtualised economy – Bauman’s ‘subjectivity-fetishism’ (2007), Žižek’s ‘enlightened false-consciousness’ (1989) and Stiegler’s ‘pharmacology of capitalism’ (2010) each *confront* contemporary consumption as something other than an immaterial mesh of apolitical individualism. Far beyond the epiphenomenal decree shown to it by Paleo-Marxism, in other words, the contemporary critique of consumption is now both alive and well.

Alive and well too, however, we find the non- and anti- Marxist analysis of consumption: post-Marxism in a negative key. Perhaps nowhere is the would-be grave of Marxism danced upon more emphatically than within marketing and consumer research. Consumer Culture Theory's (CCT) chief proponents 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). Critical Marketing's spokespeople, for their part, 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). Similarly, beyond business and management studies, the (post)-Marxist account of consumption is confronted with the same sort of fatalistic pragmatism. 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* [italics added] concern with the actually oppressed conditions of our humanity' whilst Binkley and Littler's (2008: 520) introduction to contemporary anti-consumerist sentiment bemoans the 'chest-thumping denunciations of the 'culture industry'... one of the left's favourite intellectual parlour games'. The critique of the critique of consumption, it seems, offers just as great a hurdle to the critique of consumption as does the unreflective affirmation of consumption.

Whether a critique of consumption, therefore, and whether such a critique might pertain to a politics, or not: such is the sort of questioning we invite contributors to engage with and respond towards here, *again*. On the one hand, submissions might produce an account of the limits and possibilities for a critique of consumption today by drawing upon conceptual and/or empirical resources. On the other hand, submissions might also want to address and assess the various ways in which the critique of consumption has been presented, represented and misrepresented, particularly within non- and anti-Marxist writings. In all cases, potential contributors are encouraged to contact the editors as early as possible for an initial discussion of their ideas on how to respond to this call for papers.

### **Submission Deadline and Further Information**

The final deadline for first submission is the 30<sup>st</sup> of November 2011. The issue will be published Autumn/Winter 2012. Full papers, conceptual/literature review articles, book reviews, notes, translations, interviews and a variety of other formats of contribution are all encouraged, for as long as they address the remit of the special issue as outlined above, and/or as discussed with the editors. Generic preliminary submission information can be found at <http://www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/call.htm>. All submissions should follow ephemera's submissions guidelines as they are described on our website: <http://www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/submit.htm>.

We will also be running two separate events in preparation for the publication of the special issue. The first event, scheduled for Autumn 2011, will be a discussion and reading group on the role of consumption within the (post-) Marxist tradition. The second event, scheduled for Spring 2012, will be a work in progress workshop which will give contributors the opportunity to present their papers to one another for the sake of momentary and constructive criticism. Please contact the editors, Alan Bradshaw ([a.bradshaw@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:a.bradshaw@rhul.ac.uk)) and Stephen Dunne ([s.dunne@leicester.ac.uk](mailto:s.dunne@leicester.ac.uk)), for further information.

## references

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