



# 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 away<sup>1</sup>. 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 highly<sup>2</sup>.

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

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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 Sznajder 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. (Sznajder, 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 forces<sup>3</sup>. 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 city<sup>4</sup>. However, I suggest that it is precisely this alienated nature of consumer culture that is at the heart of capitalism’s

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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 21<sup>st</sup>-century victory of what Émile Durkheim, writing at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> 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)<sup>5</sup>

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

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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 measure<sup>6</sup>. 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

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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 culture<sup>7</sup>. 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:

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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 market<sup>8</sup>.

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

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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 necessaries 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 necessaries. (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 20<sup>th</sup> 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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