

The Age of Consumer Capitalism

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Image by Sylvie Fleury

In the last few decades, academic studies have highlighted the commodity's cultural biography (Kopytoff, 1986), its busy social life (Appadurai, 1986), and its aesthetic power (Haug, 1986). This renewed interest in the commodity, however, has not re-engaged with classical political economy's study of the system of commodity production; instead, it concerns mainly the *consumption* of commodities. Accordingly, the commodity in such studies tends to figure as a one-sided object, an object of consumption whose mode of production is largely irrelevant.

In this essay, I take this object of consumption as the starting point of a historical materialist analysis of contemporary capitalism. While I reclaim the production-centred approach of classical political economy, I do not simply argue that the prevailing concern with consumption is misguided or false. On the contrary, I argue that this concern reflects a real and significant change in production relations. My model here is Marx's concept of *value* — not a collective fantasy injected into the body of the commodity, but the ideological expression of a particular mode of production (Marx, 1983). Following this model, I suggest that behind the redefinition of the commodity as object of consumption lies a fundamental shift in economic organisation — the transformation of industrial into super-industrial or consumer

capitalism.

I will proceed as follows. In the first section of the essay, I will examine in more detail the commodity as one-sided object of consumption. In the second section, I will explore how this object gains prominence under the relations of production that shape consumer capitalism. In the third, I will discuss how these same relations give rise to an ideology that emphasises particularity and fragmentation. Finally, in concluding the article, I will risk a few speculative thoughts on the future of consumer capitalism.

The Commodity As Object of Consumption

To illustrate the commodity's transformation into object of consumption, let us compare Marx's concept of "commodity fetishism" with the more recent one of "commodity aesthetics" (Haug, 1986). Commodity aesthetics fixes on the symbolic attributes of commodities, what Haug terms the "*appearance* of use-value" (Haug, 1986: 16). This appearance "becomes just as important — and practically more so — than the commodity's being itself" (Haug, 1986: 17). Marx, by contrast, did not treat aesthetics as separate from the commodity's more functional uses. For him, both are components of use-value:

A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance, they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference (Marx, 1983: 43).

For instance, a man might drive a sporty car in order to get to his office quickly, or in order to construct some meaningful identity. In both cases, he is *using* the car's particular physical characteristics as relevant to his wants. Marx's argument is that a commodity's value (here the car's), commonly expressed in its money form, is not determined by any of this, but by the socially necessary labour time employed in its production. It was the fetishistic character of value, not of use-value, that Marx tried to demystify.

Yet, today, it is precisely those bodily ("stomach") and mental ("fancy")

aspects of the commodity's use-value that captivate us. This means that today's commodity fetishism is not the same commodity fetishism discussed by Marx and other classical political economists over a century ago. Then, value had elevated the humble product of human labour into a "social hieroglyphic" (Marx, 1983: 79); now, use-value returns it back to earth, to a "grounded aesthetics" which works "through the senses, through sensual heightening, through joy, pleasure and desire, through 'fun' and the 'festive'" (Willis et al, 1990: 23-4). Then, the commodity kept the meaning of its value locked in; now, it constantly invents and proclaims new meanings. Then, its fetishistic nature seemed to be independent from the practical performances of usage; now, it exists only through them.

Today's society, therefore, fetishises the commodity's use-value more than its value. To learn why, we need to consider the double-sidedness of human labouring practice under capitalism. Both value and use-value are embodied in the commodity, but arise out of distinct aspects of that practice and are realised separately. Value originates in abstract or social labour and is realised in exchange; use-value originates in concrete labour and is realised in consumption (Marx, 1983). Thus, in the life of every commodity, there comes an actual point when value is left behind and use-value takes centre stage — the point at which the commodity leaves the sphere of circulation or market exchange and enters that of final consumption. At that point, the commodity becomes a pure use-value, an artefact, an object of consumption.

This object of consumption remains a material object, but, unlike the commodity, it no longer embodies an abstract and universal value. Its materiality no longer expresses a determinate quantity of socially necessary labour-power. Only the specific physical qualities of the object remain as qualities that are unique to that object, as the finished product of concrete labour. The object of consumption therefore appears as a de-socialised and singular material entity, a thing whose physical substance is purely self-contained.

Furthermore, this object is singular not only in itself, but in relation to its consumer. Each consumer is a unique subject for each unique object of consumption.¹ By contrast, in the commodity's value, the human subject had figured as an abstract and universal subject, as labour in general. For the commodity's

¹ And so, ordinary culture becomes a "practical science of the singular," of the "right here and now . . . a singular action linked to one situation, certain circumstances, particular actors" (de Certeau and Giard, 1998: 256).

producer, production was impersonal and social, for the market. But now, for the consumer, consumption is only for her own personal ends. Therefore, where the commodity's materiality had expressed a neutral social value, the object of consumption is loaded with concretely personal (and inter-personal) subjective meanings.²

Furthermore, this singular physical object loaded with concrete personal meanings takes part in many separate acts of consumption. Not only do subjects encounter an ever-growing quantity and variety of objects, but each use, each temporal encounter between subject and object, is different and exclusive. The wine which gave me pleasure last night might be a different wine this morning, when it gives me a headache; an old possession might suddenly acquire a new significance. Thus the world of consumption is a world of multiple but unconnected temporal experiences. By contrast, in exchange, value had expressed each commodity's transcendent connection to one continuous social process of production.

As we have seen, physical singularity, personal meaningfulness and practical multiplicity are three key characteristics of the object of consumption. They are also, as is well known, elements of the contemporary post-modern outlook. In the third section of this essay we will look more closely at how these three characteristics generate an ideology of fragmentation. But the question that now arises is: why has the object of consumption acquired such prominence at this particular point in time? After all, humans have always been consumers of use-values; without consumption, there can be no social or even biological life. In what specific and new sense of the word has our society become a *consumer* society?

One clue is the spectacular and accelerated growth of consumption in recent times (Benson, 1994; see also Brewer, 2004). Undoubtedly, consumption has lately become a more important activity, in the strict sense that we consume much more. Yet this is in turn an effect of production. If we consume more, it is because we produce more. Since WWII, in particular, a massive increase in global productive capacities has made many more commodities available to wider sections of the population

² "It is obvious that man produces his own body, e.g., through feeding, one form of consumption. But the same applies to any other kind of consumption which in one way or another contributes to the production of some aspect of man. Hence this is consumptive production. Nevertheless, says political economy, this type of production that is identical with consumption is a second phase arising from the destruction of the first product. In the first type of production the producer assumes an objective aspect, in the second type the objects created by him assume a personal aspect" (Marx, 1977: 195-6).

benefiting from increased amounts of leisure time. Nevertheless, this very achievement of the system of mass production is somehow experienced as a “consumer society,” where the object of consumption, and not the value-fetishised commodity, reigns supreme. To understand why, we need to examine how this same increase in productive capacities has affected the relationship between producers and consumers.

Producers and Consumers

In today’s Western societies, where commodities are everywhere, producers of commodities are rare. “Fewer and fewer people in contemporary capitalism work at making things. More and more people work to make impressions,” writes Alan Tomlinson (1990: 21). Just a couple of generations ago, farms³ and factories employed most of the working population; today, service employment prevails in most of these ‘advanced’ countries, accounting for two thirds of all jobs in Europe in 1995, and three fourths in the US (European Commission, 1999: 8).

At the same time, manufacturing, the most important sector of capitalist production, is itself increasingly a white-collar environment. It has been noted that “In 1992, for example, about a third of all workers employed in U.S. manufacturing industries were actually doing service-type jobs (e.g., in finance, purchasing, marketing, and administration)” (US Department of Commerce, 1996: 5). The proportion of manufacturing *production* workers has fallen from 30.7% of the private US non-farming workforce in 1939, to 9% in 2005.⁴ Not surprisingly, then, over half the revenues of some major manufacturers are generated by services, as is the case, for instance, with General Electric US and with IBM (OECD, 2000: 10). Furthermore, the practice of offshoring means that many Western manufacturing companies have turned themselves into “virtual firms,” or pure service providers; while real material

³ While there has been a shift from self-employed to waged labour in American agriculture, overall farm employment has declined dramatically. Only 1.7% of the US labour force worked on farms in 1990, down from 17% in 1940 and 38.8% in 1900. Source: data from the US Census Bureau and the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, quoted by the US Department of Agriculture’s National Agricultural Statistics Service (Trends in US Agriculture, http://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Trends_in_U.S._Agriculture/images/farm_populationcharts.asp).

⁴ Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics. Historical establishment-based data on employment, hours, and earnings from the Current Employment Statistics Survey (National), table B-1. Retrieved 6 February 2007 from <http://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cesbtab1.htm>.

production increasingly moves overseas (Dicken, 1998: 232-37).

As a result of these trends, and as Daniel Miller observes, “most people have a minimal relationship to production and distribution such that consumption provides the only arena left to us through which we might potentially forge a relationship with the world” (Miller, 1995: 17). But how significant is this change? Admittedly, productive industrial labour has rarely been the numerically predominant group in society. Even in the classical industrial era, as Marx knew, there were more servants in England than factory workers:

According to the latest report (1861 or 1862) on the factories, the total number of persons (managers included) employed in the factories properly so called of the United Kingdom was only 775,534, while the number of female servants in England alone amounted to 1 million. What a convenient arrangement it is that makes a factory girl to sweat twelve hours in a factory, so that the factory proprietor, with a part of her unpaid labour, can take into his personal service her sister as maid, her brother as groom and her cousin as soldier or policeman! (Marx, 1978: 201).

Yet, if the relative scale of service employment is not without precedent, its social form is. Most of today’s service workers do not operate within a personal domestic economy, as Victorian servants did, nor as a separate bureaucracy or profession — like a priesthood, or a military. They are employed directly by capital.

This incorporation of service labour as a major component of the capitalist economy is characteristic of a definite phase in capitalism’s history. From the classical industrial era onwards, the expansion of capitalist relations tended to erode traditional, household-based service work.⁵ Yet, during the last century or so — the epoch classical Marxism terms imperialism (Lenin, 1977) — capitalist development in the advanced nations has also tended to reduce productive employment and to favour new, commercialised service occupations. This represents a major rearrangement of relations between producers and consumers *within capitalism itself*,

⁵ In the 1950s, AJP Taylor opined that academic concern about the decline of civilisation “means only that university professors used to have domestic servants and now do their own washing-up” (quoted in Carr, 1987: 112). Private household occupations represented 6% of US employment, or 2,319,000 workers, in 1910, but only 0.45% of employment, or 523,000 workers, in 1990 (Wyatt and Hecker, 2006: 53).

a rearrangement that has turned materially unproductive services into the largest and fastest-growing sector of the capitalist economy, at least in the West.

Service industries are unproductive in the sense that they do not produce material goods for exchange.⁶ This is not to say that any of them are “weightless” (Coyle, 1997) or immaterial. On the contrary, like all types of human and natural activity, they involve determinate physical interactions. As well as flesh-and-blood workers and customers, for example, retailing needs floor space, cash tills, and shelves full of goods; management consultancy requires offices, computers, and paper; tourism demands hotels and airplanes. But, for the most part, the operations of these industries, however useful or profitable, are not materially *productive*. They only *consume* floor space, cash tills, computers, hotels and airplanes. They use up material goods, without producing any themselves. Yet this sort of operation has replaced the factory as the model capitalist setting, where workers no longer transform natural materials into wealth, and managers manage ideas, projects and partnerships instead of physical production processes. An economy where such service industries predominate may be labelled “consumer capitalism”⁷ and its emergence is one of the most important developments of recent times.

A counterargument to this narrative would hold that services, if they are sold on the market, are also a type of commodity, and that, therefore, the changes described above do not represent a significant shift towards unproductive forms of capitalism. They could simply be a further step in the normal process of capital expansion and product innovation. Certainly, this argument is implicitly accepted by official statistical agencies, which include both “goods” and “services” within a country’s GDP. It also fits in with some Marxist interpretations that describe recent capitalist development in terms of “commodification.” Fredric Jameson, for example, argues, following Mandel, that “late or multinational or consumer capitalism, far from being inconsistent with Marx’s great nineteenth-century analysis, constitutes, on the

⁶ However, some activities commonly labelled as services are in fact part of the production process. The distinction between productive and unproductive labour — and the corresponding distinction between productive and unproductive capital — is still much debated within Marxism, and generally rejected outside of it.

⁷ Zygmunt Bauman is therefore right that we can justifiably speak “of our society as a society of a separate and distinct kind — a consumer society” (Bauman, 1998: 24). There is similarly an important kernel of truth behind labels such as “service,” “post-industrial,” “dematerialised,” “weightless,” “knowledge,” “aestheticised” and “New” economy. But what needs to be explained are the common roots of these formations in one particular historical mode of production.

contrary, the purest form of capital yet to have emerged, a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas” (Jameson, 1991:36).

The trouble with this argument is that it equates market exchange with commodity production. The market, however, is only a space for commercial activity, where tangible products (commodities; antiques; art objects; second-hand cars; crafts, etc) and intangible products (stocks and shares; business services; pop music; insurance policies; information; etc) are traded. It is not itself a space for production. So, the fact that services and culture are increasingly bought and sold indicates that they are ever more commercialised, but it does not turn such products into commodities.⁸ The transformation of capitalism in recent decades includes, but goes beyond, the commercialisation of services and culture; for this commercialisation is, in turn, the result of certain developments in the sphere of material production proper.

At this point, the term “consumer capitalism,” which captures a fundamental truth about our age, becomes insufficient, for it conceals its determination by a particular mode of production. This concealment, however, is practical and not merely ideological; it is based on the real marginalisation of productive labour in today’s society. Yet we cannot fully understand the development of consumer capitalism without examining those marginalised and hidden processes of production — how, where and by whom are the abundant material goods we consume produced in the first place. In this respect, three interrelated trends are of especial significance: globalisation, productivity growth, and the degradation of productive labour. Together, these three trends have increased the quantity of surplus-value that unproductive industries draw from. Let us briefly discuss how.

Firstly, globalisation is bringing about a new geographical division of labour, whereby the older, more powerful post-industrial nations increasingly consume what newer, industrialising ones produce. William Greider witnessed this transformation at a Motorola plant in Malaysia, where young Muslim women, swapping headscarves for white jumpsuits and surgical masks, manufactured semiconductor chips (Greider, 1997: 82-83). Greider was impressed by

⁸ One can apparently sell one’s soul on eBay (see <http://www.kembrew.com/pranks/sellingmysoul.html>), but this does not turn souls into commodities. Commodities are material objects produced for exchange (Marx, 1983). If souls were to be sold by a multinational corporation employing thousands of people and making millions in profits, this would still not turn souls or soul-saving services into commodities; but it would certainly turn capitalism into an even more weird and degenerate creature.

the recurring experience of witnessing poor people who dwell in marginal backwaters doing industrial work of the most advanced order. People of color, people who are black, yellow, red, brown, who exist in surroundings of primitive scarcity, are making complex things of world-class quality, mastering modern technologies that used to be confined to a select few (Greider, 1997: 20).

Globalisation enlarges Western capital's pool of available productive labourers, compensating to some extent for the relative shrinkage of domestic productive capacity. The consequences for Western societies are profound and contradictory. On the one hand, appropriating wealth produced abroad allows those societies to increase domestic consumption at a faster rate than domestic production, and to afford relative levels of national affluence and social peace at the expense of foreign workers. But, on the other hand, this geographical re-arrangement of production relations also renders Western societies increasingly out of touch with their own practical conditions of existence. For example, the high-tech equipment that supports America's vast consumer entertainment culture is largely imported, as Joel Kurtzman noted already in the 1980s:

Whole sectors of the vast American market have been abandoned by US firms without even a fight so that even if you wanted to, you could not buy an American-made VCR, camcorder, compact-disc player, fax machine, digital tape cassette recorder, mini television receiver, "Walkman," digital television, or quality 35-mm camera (Kurtzman, 1988: 26).

Secondly, both in the old and in the new industrial heartlands, technology-driven productivity has grown at a sustained pace for decades. Between 1950 and 2000, labour productivity in manufacturing (output per hour) grew by an annual average of 2.9% in the US, 3.0% in Canada, 4.8% in France, 4.7% in Germany, 4.5% in Italy, 3.2% in the UK, 6.3% in Japan (1955 to 2000 only), 5.1% in the Netherlands, 2.9% in Norway, and 4.2% in Sweden (Cobet and Wilson, 2002). In agriculture, productivity has also grown markedly, so that, between 1900 and 1997, "the time required to cultivate an acre of wheat [in the US] decreased from more than 2 weeks to about 2 hours, while for an acre of corn, it declined from 38 hours to 2 hours"

(Wyatt and Hecker, 2006: 55). In the newly-industrialising nations, productivity has often grown even faster. For example, output per hour in Korean manufacturing grew by an annual rate of 11.6% between 1995 and 2000, as compared with 4.6% in the US and 2.3% in the UK during the same period (Cobet and Wilson, 2002). Productivity growth increases the rate of surplus-value (Marx, 1983: 487-91).

Thirdly, in many cases contemporary capitalism is also able to increase the rate of surplus-value by degrading the conditions of life of productive workers. Even in the West, many such workers belong to once-lively working-class communities which are slowly being decimated by restructurings, loss of collective bargaining power, or deteriorating physical environments. Their predicament occasionally comes to public attention when, for example, miners are killed “accidentally” at work (Ely, 2006); but hardly ever do we reflect that such deadening labour is what makes our consuming lives possible.

Increasingly, moreover, these workers are being replaced by immigrants employed in far more dire conditions — whether it is Latvian workers picking mushrooms in Ireland (Burns, 2005); Chinese labourers collecting cockles and drowning in Morecambe Bay (Pai, 2004); or Latin Americans working for low wages in the fields, kitchens, building sites and sweatshops of the US. Together with the millions employed — often in the same kind of dehumanising terms, or worse — in mines, factories, farms and fisheries all over the developing world, these are the people who produce most of the commodities we consume. Yet, their plight hardly figures in today’s consumption studies, where, for all the interest in the “multiplicity of practices” (Warde, 2005), those that simultaneously connect and divide producers and consumers remain under-investigated. This intellectual neglect of the role of productive workers, though, is not constructed in the pages of academic journals; it reflects their real social neglect.

What has taken place, then, over the last few decades, is an enhancement as well as a redistribution of the productive powers of labour across the globe, alongside a diminution of its social and political standing. The resulting new arrangement in capitalist relations can be labelled super-industrialism — a term I borrow from Alvin Toffler (1971). Super-industrialism is a highly productive and exploitative industrial system which paradoxically feeds the growth of a consumer or unproductive capitalism. Under this system, a smaller proportion of workers, increasingly based in

the developing world, generate an expanded amount of surplus-value, thereby sustaining the socially predominant and materially unproductive service sectors. Super-industrialism and consumer capitalism are one and the same economic system, a system that has emerged out of the growth and development of the previous industrial one. Thus, the more that society has industrialised, the less industrial it has become; and the more productive, the more consumer-oriented.

It is in this sense that consumption may be characterised as the vanguard of recent history (Miller, 1995). But consumer capitalism, an economic system based on extreme social divisions, is unlikely to be the end point of all of human history. And it may not even represent the final configuration of capitalist development. Yet the one-sided focus on consumption at the expense of underlying production processes can blind us to the temporality of the present economic arrangements, making us think of our own times as post-everything and pre-nothing — a sense of historical finality that echoes the finality of the act of consumption itself.

History reminds us that previous eras marked by the predominance of unproductive capitalism did not last. The ascendance of merchant capitalism from around the 16th century was overturned by the Industrial Revolution, which subordinated trading to manufacturing capital. Even in our own imperialist epoch, when unproductive forms of capitalism express a generalised economic over-maturity (Lenin, 1977), periods of rapid growth and social change can bring industry back to a dominant economic position. Thus, to a significant extent, WWII ushered in a new industrial era, marked by a shift in hegemonic power from Britain to the US. And so it is quite possible that today's consumer capitalism will be followed by the reassertion of production in a new and more developed form, and under a very different geo-political arrangement.

To a degree, this process of re-industrialisation is already under way. Currently, consumer capitalism is chiefly — though not uniquely — a Western phenomenon. But, just as a certain historical level of industrial development produced Western consumer capitalism, so is the latter, in turn, accelerating processes of industrialisation in parts of the developing world. As Western societies become ever more consumer-oriented, so they create new industrial powers elsewhere. The UK's former Chancellor of the Exchequer (and current Prime Minister) Gordon

Brown has already warned of the consequences of a global rearrangement in patterns of production:

In 1980 less than a tenth of manufacturing exports came from developing countries. Today it's 25 per cent: in twenty years time 50 per cent. That's not just cars and computers but half of all the world's manufacturing exports coming from developing countries.

By 2015 up to 5 million American and European jobs could have moved offshore — outsourced to countries like India and China as they strive to become the world's second and third largest economies. Indeed even today China's significance to the global economy is that every year it, on its own, is adding as much output as the whole of the G7 put together (Brown, 2004).

Globalisation, which feeds the power of Western consumer capitalism, is simultaneously undermining that same power by creating immense new centres of production in Asia, Latin America, and perhaps soon in Africa. Tensions with, within, and between, these newly industrialising regions are already causing severe difficulties for European and US foreign policies, and are likely to foster political and military conflict in the twenty-first century.

For the time being, and for as long as Western capital remains globally dominant, consumer capitalism will continue to shape the institutions and ideas of contemporary society, stamping onto every ideological form its own unproductive character. For it is not only that the consumer is king, but that the king, the Western capitalist, has become a consumer. The ideology of consumer capitalism, then, is not false. It is not foisted on society through psychological manipulation (Packard, 1957), the superimposition of false needs (Marcuse, 1991), aesthetic self-deception (Haug, 1986) or even through a “dependence effect” on production (Galbraith, 1999). The ideology of today's dominant classes is reproduced, throughout society, by the practices of a service-providing economy which relates to the material world one-sidedly through consumption. It reflects the actual yet partial experiences of Western man, woman, and child within the divisive mode of production that shapes today's global economy.

Ideology of the Fragment

In the first section of this article, I described the object of consumption as a singular physical object loaded with subjective meanings and involved in multiple experiences. In the second section, I suggested that this object of consumption comes to the fore, historically, as a result of the structural transformation of industrial into super-industrial or consumer capitalism. The object of consumption may therefore be considered as the elemental cell of this specific mode of production. I will now examine in more detail how this elemental cell generates also a particular ideology, a system of social images and notions expressing the partiality and one-sidedness of social relations in the age of consumer capitalism.

Today's ideology, like today's economy, is populated by singular subjects and objects engaged in multiple and separate interactions with each other. We may characterise this ideology as an ideology of the fragment, or as an ideology of particularity. Contemporary ideology simply translates the really unproductive character of consumption into its corresponding figures: subjects who construct meanings without transforming objects, who choose and desire but are materially powerless; objects whose materiality asserts itself independently from subjects; and lived experience as a succession of isolated and superficial encounters that have no transcending aim. I will now examine this ideology of the fragment in more detail, considering in turn subject, object, and experience.

The One-Sided Subject

In the age of consumer capitalism, the subject has a restricted sphere of action. This sphere of action consists not in transforming objects, or even in knowing them, but in projecting onto them the subject's own mental constructions, her⁹ personal meanings, choices and desires. The essential property of these constructions is that they are non-referential; that is to say, they are wholly and one-sidedly subjective, independent from the object's physical substance. Zygmunt Bauman writes of this

⁹ Today's paradigmatic consumer is female, not only because much personal consumption takes place in the home, a place traditionally associated with women; but also because the post-industrial workforce and the non-productive labour it performs is increasingly feminised.

non-referential character of subjectivity in relation to desire, but his observations could also be applied to meaning- and choice-making:

The *spiritus movens* of consumer activity is not a set of articulated, let alone fixed, needs, but *desire* — a much more volatile and ephemeral, evasive and capricious, and essentially nonreferential phenomenon; a self-begotten and self-perpetuating motive that calls for no justification or apology either in terms of an objective or a cause (Bauman, 2001:13).

Meanings, choices and desires are non-referential because they are not embodied in the object. Everything that is embodied in the object, the set of physical properties that makes it meaningful, desirable and valuable to the consumer, derives from the concrete labour that produced it, not from the consumer's own activity. Consumption, in fact, destroys those physical properties, producing nothing material beyond the consumer herself. The consumer's constructions, then, as far as the object is concerned, are really immaterial. They cannot be part of the object's substance; they can only touch its appearance or surface. They therefore appear as what they are — the consciousness of a subject peripheral to the object's body.

Let us now examine more closely what is perhaps the most pervasive expression of this peripheral consciousness, the idea of choice.¹⁰ The post-modern age is truly “a time of incessant choosing” (Jencks, 1989: 7), in two contradictory senses. Firstly, in the progressive sense that a greater amount and variety of commodities, and hence of choices, is being produced; secondly, in the regressive sense that we exercise power over those commodities exclusively a-posteriori, as consumers. This mixture of the progressive and the regressive is one reason why the consumer has been alternately saluted as hero, and reviled as dupe (Slater, 1997).

With a greater number of choices, consumers have more room for self-

¹⁰ This idea plays a central role in rational choice theory, which has recently gained much influence within the social sciences (Gintis, 2004). In philosophy we have the notion of humans as “choice machines,” developed by computer scientist Gary Drescher. According to Drescher, choice is “a process of examining assertions about what would be the case if this or that action were taken, and then selecting an action according to a preference about what would be the case. The objection *The agent didn't really make a choice, because the outcome was already predetermined* is as much of a non sequitur as the objection *The motor didn't really exert force, because the outcome was already predetermined*” (Drescher, 2006: 192). Notice that the choice is not in the action, but in the “examining” of assertions and the “selecting” of actions, that is to say, the choice is purely subjective; while the action, being pre-determined, is purely objective.

expression (Fiske, 1989; Willis et al, 1990).¹¹ Yet, excluded from production, they have no power to transform the basis of their material existence, living a life that is, even at the best of times, and regardless of their personal intentions, parasitic on an exploitative form of production. Hence, their sense of freedom from the old constraints, their very enjoyment of each playful opportunity for consumption, is easily spoilt by guilt, fear and insecurity — sentiments that motivate much of today's consumer politics.

This regressive aspect of consumption has provoked important reactions. Critics like Stuart Ewen, for example, have warned that “the human subject is in jeopardy; destined only to be defined as a consumer” (Ewen, 1990: 52). Attacks on consumerism have gathered pace since the 1970s, as Western de-industrialisation speeded up and the label “consumer” turned into “more a claim to personal entitlement than a commitment to society's collective well-being” (Cohen, 2003: 387). Often, such attacks turned into a criticism of the consumer, as in President Carter's 1979 “malaise speech” denouncing Americans' “worship [of] self-indulgence and consumption” (quoted in Cohen, 2003: 389).

But the faults of the consumer society cannot be laid at the feet of individual morality. Consumer choice is grounded in a historically-specific regime of production. It is therefore a self-denying paradox, cleverly summed up in Anthony Giddens' formulation that “we have no choice but to choose” (Giddens, 1991: 81). Giddens goes on to endorse choice as enabler of reflexive life projects, while recognising some of its limitations. By contrast, I would stress that the progressive aspect of greater consumer choice arises directly from the development of productive forces. The fact that society has access to a greater quantity, quality and variety of goods represents a historical achievement of the super-industrial mode of production.

Yet this same mode of production puts up an absolute barrier to social progress by excluding the vast majority from ownership of and control over it. This is quite obviously the case for the millions of industrial and agricultural workers who produce most of the world's wealth. But even to consumers, affluent or — more

¹¹ These texts treat the consumer-author as a progressive agent, but they also contain some recognition of the limits and burdens of consumer capitalism. Fiske (1989) notes the unequal power relations underlying popular culture. Willis et al admit that “large parts of common culture are simply indifferent to that system which supplies the products it is certainly not indifferent to” (1990: 158), and consider the possibility of “achieving a final human and democratic socialism as something different from common culture” (1990: 160).

often — not, today’s mode of production offers only a ready-made phenomenal world, where choice is always after-the-event, between options — objects and experiences of consumption — which have already been produced. Consumer capitalism, then, is a game whose rules have been pre-set, and whose players, to paraphrase the terms of game theory, are prisoners of the dilemma. For this reason, the proliferation of choice and reflexivity goes hand in hand with apathy and fatalism. As Christopher Lasch argues,

Unless the idea of choice carries with it the possibility of making a difference, of changing the course of events, of setting in motion a chain of events that may prove irreversible, it negates the freedom it claims to uphold. Freedom comes down to the freedom to choose between Brand X and Brand Y, between interchangeable lovers, interchangeable jobs, interchangeable neighborhoods (Lasch 1985: 38).

Conscious choice is a natural human capacity, but a society that upholds choice as a core ideological principle is a historical phenomenon. That is why the contemporary notion of choice differs significantly from the Enlightenment notion of free will, even though they both conceive of human agency in idealist terms. In the age of consumer capitalism, the subject ceases to be conceived of as abstract and universal — as Reason, the moral law, the aesthetic principle, divine Providence, etc — because its foundation is the real particularised subject, the personal consumer.¹²

Unlike the Enlightenment’s free will, the contemporary notion of choice is necessarily particular, personal, and temporal. Firstly, it is particular in that it is always bounded by specific available options; whereas free will was an abstract and open-ended capacity, liberated from all concrete determinations. Secondly, choice is personal, since no two consumers have exactly the same taste and range of options available; while free will was universal, grounded in our common rationality. Thirdly, choice has to be made, enacted or revealed in “real time” in order to exist; whereas free will was prior to any temporal action. As compared to free will, then,

¹² Compare today’s emphasis on concrete objects and personalised subjects with Immanuel Kant’s stress on abstract universal values, both objective and subjective: “In the kingdom of ends everything has either a price or a dignity. Whatever has a price can be replaced by something else as its equivalent; on the other hand, whatever is above all price, and therefore admits of no equivalent, has a dignity” (Kant, 1993: 40).

choice is closer to lived reality, but it also implies a drastic reduction in the subject's sphere of action. Free will entailed a potential for outcomes that transcended immediate experience and inclinations, even though this transcendence was conceived of as moral, mental or spiritual, rather than material and historical. Choice, on the other hand, resolves itself in the narrowest terms, as a preference over an option which is already there.

In the age of consumer capitalism, then, our power to project meanings, choices and desires onto objects reveals our *material* powerlessness. It is because we no longer have a productive relationship with matter that agency takes this immaterial form. Bruno Latour is therefore right in admitting that “‘reflexive’ does not signal an increase in mastery and consciousness, but only a heightened awareness that mastery is impossible and that control over actions is now seen as a complete modernist fiction” (Latour, 2003: 36).

The One-Sided Object

Let me now question the distinction, which Bauman alludes to in the quote above, between fixed natural need and variable cultural desire, bearing in mind that desire functions, in this distinction, as just another form of one-sided subjectivity, alongside notions such as “meaning” and “choice.” From a historical materialist perspective, need is no more fixed or natural than desire, because both of them are met by human productive practices. The “desire” to consume does not hang in the air any more than the “need” to consume does; it requires actual material objects produced by real people in historically specific ways.¹³

If anything, this requirement for produced objects is more characteristic of desire, in the contemporary sense of the word, than of other kinds of human wanting. A need may remain unfulfilled, but desire is self-fulfilling,¹⁴ because its object is always already present, beckoning and seducing the consumer. Similarly, desire

¹³ “When consumption emerges from its original primitive crudeness and immediacy — and its remaining in that state would be due to the fact that production was still primitively crude — then it is itself as a desire brought about by the object. The need felt for the object is induced by the perception of the object. An *object d’art* creates a public that has artistic taste and is able to enjoy beauty — and the same can be said of any other product. Production accordingly produces not only an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object” (Marx, 1977: 197).

¹⁴ Desire, says Gilles Deleuze, “constructs its own plane and lacks nothing” (Deleuze, 1993: 140).

differs from nostalgia and yearning — sentiments invoking objects already gone, but persisting, partially, in memory; or objects not yet produced, but prefigured by the imagination. Desire, in contrast, has none of this romantic quality. It is completely realistic, but its realism, as we have seen, is restricted to the here and now, to the immediately available.

In the age of consumer capitalism, then, the subject submits herself totally to the material impositions of a ready-made world. Of course, this world has been shaped by human labour through processes that are global in reach; still, the consumer meets that labour not as a living social force of which she is a part, but as a collection of dead and finished objects. This is, then, a world that appears external to us, just as we are to it; a world that overwhelms us by its sheer physical weight, its seeming independent life, and its alarming fragility, which finally disintegrates away in consumption.¹⁵

Our material powerlessness grants power to the material world. Hence, the counterpart of meaning, choice and desire, of a restricted and one-sided subjectivism, is a restricted and one-sided materialism that draws our attention to “the things themselves” (Appadurai, 1986: 5), to objects’ physical presence as autonomous from that agency, to their “utter singularization” (Kopytoff, 1986: 87) and disenchantment (Ritzer, 1999). Such restricted materialism thrives across the varieties of intellectual practice. In psychology and in the philosophy of mind, for instance, it produces a physicalist turn away from traditional dualistic approaches (for instance, Wegner, 2002). In art, it promotes a strong minimalist focus on the irreducible materiality of the object world.¹⁶ And in the social sciences, it leads to material culture, the “study of things- or objects-in-use” (Lury, 1996: 1; see also Dant, 2005), and, simultaneously, to a sociology of things (Preda, 1999), the study of things in action. Latour’s work is perhaps the best example of how this sociology of things treats objects as agents in their own right, so that

¹⁵ With his de-installation *Break Down*, artist Michael Landy exposed, opposed, and became an intentional instrument of, consumptive destruction (see Walford, 2001).

¹⁶ 2001 Turner Prize winner Martin Creed says of his installations of lights going on and off, doors opening and closing, etc., that these are “all ways of having something, of doing something, making something happen, but in a way without anything happening. The light’s just doing what it does, you know, and the door’s just doing what it does” (Illuminations, 2002: 100).

kettles “boil” water, knives “cut” meat, baskets “hold” provisions, hammers “hit” nails on the head, rails “keep” kids from falling, locks “close” rooms against uninvited visitors, soap “takes” the dirt away, schedules “list” class sessions . . . and so on *ad infinitum* (Latour, 2004: 225-6).

In this account, the practical uses of objects come to the fore as the objects’ own self-activity, while users, not to mention producers, are screened off.¹⁷ Kettles, knives, baskets, hammers, move before our eyes as in a magic lantern show, energised and lit up; while the people who manipulate them blend away into the darkened background, and the people who made them remain wholly outside the performance.¹⁸ In another text, however, as Latour foregrounds his own experience as user, we discover just how remote it is from the process of production:

For reasons unknown to me, the maker of my desk prevents me from opening a drawer without the two others being carefully and completely shut. The designer has disappeared; besides, the firm (with some justice) went bankrupt ages ago; I am not a good enough bricoleur to discover the counterprogramme which would put an end to this aberration; nevertheless 20 times a day for 10 years, I am “obliged” to obey this meddlesome moral law since I am not “authorized” to leave the three drawers open at the same time. I rail against it but I get on with it, and I have no shame in admitting that every day there is no other moral law that I apply with such inflexible severity. Blast it, it is because I am bound by it! Of course, the moral law is in our hearts, but it is also in our apparatuses (Latour, 2002: 253).

¹⁷ In a very different form, this dehumanisation of the object was also present in Dadaism’s deconstruction of language into words, as Roland Barthes notes: “Nature becomes a discontinuum of solitary and terrible objects because they have only virtual links. No one chooses for them a privileged meaning or use or service. No one reduces them to mean a mental attitude or an intention, that is to say, in the last analysis, a tenderness. . . . These word objects without link, armed with all the violence of their explosive power . . . these poetic words exclude men” (quoted and translated in Marcuse, 1991: 69). The dehumanisation implied by today’s sociology of things is of a different kind, whereby objects exclude men not by becoming abstract, impersonal words, but by becoming concrete personal agents themselves. In the process, objects gain a wealth of privileged meanings, uses, services, mental attitudes and intentions — an aspect examined by material culture studies.

¹⁸ Similarly, Rachel Whiteread highlights what happened *after* she made “Amber Bed,” the rubber cast of a bed’s underside, and became a spectator: “It was very heavy, and I was shifting it around the studio, and I plonked it against the wall. It did this amazing thing, where it just sort of took on the shape of the wall and sat there, slumped, looking like a body. Every time I turned round I would get a shock, thinking it was someone sitting in the corner of the studio” (Illuminations, 2002: 51).

Thus the powerlessness of the consumer vis-à-vis the production process is experienced as the active tyranny of the finished object — as an object-sized moral law. Morality is now restricted to the single and immediate dimension of “is,” no longer transcended by means of its negation, “ought” (Marcuse, 1991); while reason similarly limits itself to the set of available options. “If people very strongly desire what they cannot get, they will be unhappy; such desires, therefore, are irrational,” says Jon Elster (1986: 15). In the age of consumer capitalism, then, morality and reason submit to a reality principle that no longer defers pleasure and accepts pain for the sake of future achievements, but asserts the pleasure and pain of the actually experienced world.

And so we find the materiality of a there-to-be-consumed world perfectly aligned with the malleable performances of post-modern reflexivity. Dehumanized things and immaterial meanings are two sides of one coin, the objective and subjective aspects of social experience under consumer capitalism.¹⁹ That is why the authority of the given material world co-exists with notions of contemporary society as somehow uniquely “cultural,” “virtual,” even “immaterial.” It is why unknowable and impenetrable objects end up reflecting our constructed desires; mere things turn into carriers of social meaning (Douglas and Isherwood, 1996), aesthetic objects (Haug, 1986), or stuff embedded in social narratives (Harré, 2002); people become post-human “informational-material” entities (Hayles, 1999: 11); and an economy of physical plenty melts away into intangible flows of information and knowledge.

Fragmented Experiences

The world of consumer capitalism is, as we have seen, a world of many singular and one-sided subjects and objects. Necessarily, then, it is a chaotic and multiple world, “a heterogeneous assemblage of bodies, vocabularies, judgments, techniques, inscriptions, practices” (Rose, 1998:182); a world where thinkers stress the plurality and complexity of human experience (Urry, 2005); political programs

¹⁹ Jean Baudrillard’s defence of *consummation* — “play, gift, destruction as pure loss, symbolic reciprocity” (Baudrillard, 2001b: 96) — is an attempt to bring together these subjective and objective aspects, which are really the subjective and objective aspects of concrete use-value; hence his rejection of both value and what he terms ‘abstract’ use-value. But what Baudrillard overlooks is that this concreteness is in actual fact the way we now experience our divided material relations.

celebrate diversity, or, conversely, warn about its dangers; and artistic techniques such as montage reproduce the kaleidoscopic effect of division, repetition, and discontinuity. In this world, time is the a-historical and depthless dimension of the pure event, the everyday (de Certeau, 1984; Willis et al, 1990), the ephemeral (Appadurai, 1997), and the accidental (Virilio, 2006),²⁰ of virtual and actual immediacy; while the self becomes afflicted by “multiphrenia” — “the splitting of the individual into a multiplicity of self-investments” (Gergen 1991: 73-4).

Philosopher Nancy Cartwright supposes “that, as appearances suggest, we live in a dappled world, a world rich in different things, with different natures, behaving in different ways” (Cartwright, 1999:1). But appearances, even when real, are not all of reality. Beneath the erosion of the public sphere (Sennett, 1978), the proliferation of identities and lifestyles, and the emergence of a lonely individualism (Luttwak, 1999)²¹; beneath the emotional mixture of numbness and anxiety provoked by the endless succession of casual encounters; beneath the ideology of the fragment, in sum, lies the fragmentation of society into particular acts of consumption. Yet this fragmentation constitutes also a historical totality, a specific set of material relations between people.

Conclusion

Although consumption has not really “grasped the whole of life,” as Baudrillard (2001a: 36) would have it, it cannot be doubted that, at least, it now appears to be autonomous and powerful enough to shape contemporary society in its own image. In this article, I have proposed a historical materialist account of this appearance as the ideological effect of a particular mode of production — super-industrialism. Under this mode of production, we Western consumers really do experience the material world as a mass of alien “stuff”; while our own sense of agency is limited to the personal consciousness of contingent desire, meaning- and choice-making.

²⁰ Contrast this perspective with E.H. Carr’s argument that the historian must search for general causes, because “Accidental causes cannot be generalized; and, since they are in the fullest sense of the word unique, they teach no lessons and lead to no conclusions” (Carr, 1987: 107).

²¹ “Loneliness is the price we pay for complexity,” says Jean-François Lyotard (quoted in de Barros, 2005). See also Riesman et al., 1950.

My analysis agrees with the post-industrial thesis (Bell, 1974) and other interpretations in identifying a historical shift in capitalist economic relations from production to consumption. But, in my interpretation, production remains the determining social activity. This is not so peculiar if we remember that capitalist modes of production are not usually experienced in an unmediated fashion. Marx showed that in the industrial era it was the *circulation* of commodities, not their production, which appeared to define capitalism. It was in circulation that material relations between people revealed themselves as social relations between things. This, he insisted, was not a distortion of reality, but the fitting and real self-image of a dehumanising society.

Today, consumption increasingly plays the paradigmatic role that circulation used to play in the classical industrial era. Just like modern bourgeois ideology assumed the standpoint of the commodity owner and seller, so does post-modern ideology tend to assume that of the purchaser and consumer. Consumption truly shapes our lives, both materially and ideologically; but we need to consider the productive practices that make it possible if we want to grasp its historical character.

What, then, about the future of this society? It seems safe to say that the glossy, sanitised spectacles of reflexive consumption will never manage to totally “re-enchant” the world (Ritzer, 1999).²² The endless construction of identities and desires, disconnected from the *material* power to shape society according to human designs, will always feel somewhat inauthentic, because it actually is. For every construction there is a deconstruction; every choice is unconnected and irrelevant to the next one; and the proliferation and commercialisation of meanings exposes the lack of common purpose at the heart of our society.

Therefore, consumer ideology should be seen as an index of the decay of advanced capitalism (Lenin, 1977), and, particularly, of the West’s economic and cultural decline. As such, its triumph is only partial, and signals not the end of historical change, but its necessity. In the very conditions that underpin this consumer society, we can already glimpse the potential for a different and more humane one. The rapid progress of science and technology; the industrialisation and modernisation of large sections of what was once the Third World; the creation of a more closely

²² Consider President Bush’s call for Americans to go shopping in response to 9/11, at once an acknowledgement of the US’s true role as the globe’s paramount consumer, and a delusional act of faith in national “retail therapy.”

integrated global economy and culture; and the stirring aspirations of people everywhere, are progressive trends that, even in their presently divisive, corrupt and often barbaric forms, provide a real basis for hope. Post-modernity, the age of consumer capitalism, is our present, already becoming a different future.

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