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Consumerism as Folk Religion?

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When talking about consumerism in the context of religion and critiques of capitalism, the standard approach is to portray it as some sort of adoration of a golden calf. Both theologians and critical social scientists are quick to liken consumerism to religion – and they are equally quick to point out that it is a *false* religion, a trivial fetishism that yearns for salvation in the form of absolute wealth, replacing spiritual aspirations with materialistic greed. I don't buy the story of consumerism as mere capitalist idolatry.

I am going to argue that consumerism is the folk-religious manifestation of the now dominant civil religion which Émile Durkheim (1899) has called the "[cult of the individual](#)" and whose high-church version is the human rights discourse. What is more, it provides for the trivial everyday experience that cements the plausibility of the otherwise quite abstract notion of "human rights". (for a discussion of Durkheim's notion of the "sacred" and its secular expression cf. Pickering 1990)

Consumerism, I claim, *does* have a spiritual and an ethical dimension which is inspired by its Romantic/Protestant heritage, and sustained by the structural romanticism of money. I will argue that this ethos of consumerism collides with the realities of capitalist processes and relations of production where they are felt to infringe on individual self-expression and self-development.

To begin with I have to clarify that here I am not talking of conspicuous consumption, the consumption of status goods which Thorstein Veblen (1994) has portrayed in his *Theory of the Leisure Class* and which Scott Fitzgerald has so vividly illustrated in *The Great Gatsby*. This "consumerism" is one that always has been around – even before capitalism – and is nothing but a reverberation of an aristocratic habitus that has undergone a degree of generalisation. It is significant that, as Chris Rojek (2000) has pointed out, this pattern is applicable mainly to societies like Saudi Arabia (and as it happens, Theeb al-Dossry (2012) found that there it is fuelled mainly by a dynamic of tribal competitiveness, obligatory generosity and the agonic gift exchange that is traditional Arab hospitality).

l, as we know from the warnings in religious texts, must also be a phenomenon much older than modern consumerism)

What I am talking about here today is the consumerism of the images and the imagination which Colin Campbell (1987) had in mind when tracing its roots in the Romantic movements of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. I am talking about the consumerism that began with the avid devouring not of novels and developed into a desire for goods and services that cater for what could be called a "cinematic experience".

If we are to liken consumerism to a deviant religious practice as castigated in the Scriptures, it is not a cult of the golden calf or Mammon, it is that of the Serpent who alerts humans to the fact that they share in the divine creative imagination (or from an atheist perspective: that the creative imagination has always been their own).

Transcendence

Thomas Luckmann (1967) identified the interpretation of the transcendent nature of human existence as the central function of religion. By transcendence he meant not just the absolute beyond, the out-of-this-world which may help us understand what is going on within this our world. Transcendence here denotes the fact that humans do not just live in the here-and-now but are temporally and spatially extended into where and when they are not (no more, not yet). Unlike Nietzsche's famous cow in the Second Untimely, humans have a past and a future – that they *are* their pasts and their futures. The transcendent is relevant for the immanent. Luckmann notes that in an ever more fluid world the interpretations, the holy cosmoi constructed by institutionalised religion, which tend to undergo a process of ossification after their initial charismatic phase, are less and less able to offer satisfactory answers to problems of transcendence as they are posed in people's everyday lives.

That does not mean the problem of transcendence, which in its most immediate and profane form is one of identity construction through time and space, goes away. To the contrary, where occupational structures are becoming more individualised and life paths more a matter of choice, it becomes more pressing – especially during adolescence. Luckmann saw popular culture taking the place of interpreter and mediator here, constituting an “invisible religion”. But he is not too specific about how this works, how consumerism can take on such a task – a task that, I think, can be characterised by the catholic-romantic proto-hippie Gilbert K Chesterton's (2001: 2) quest for disenchantment or remagification:

“How can this queer cosmic town, with its many-legged citizens, with its monstrous and ancient lamps, how can this world give us at once the fascination of a strange town and the comfort and honour of being our own town?”

In other words: how can we be at once here and not-here, now and not-now, immanent and transcendent?

Here the work of Colin Campbell (1987) on *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* is enlightening. Campbell traces the heritage of contemporary consumer culture back to its roots in the Romantic movements of the late 18th and early 19th century... and beyond that links Romanticism back to the Reformation and the turn towards inner life and imagination which it had triggered.

In this perspective consumerism is hedonistic, but not in the traditional sense of a search for satisfaction of bodily needs and desires. Such traditional hedonism, he argues, could not explain the insatiability of demand on which capitalist accumulation depends – stomachs can only be filled once in a while. He contrasts this with what he calls “autonomous imaginative hedonism” – a mentality and skill that he sees as strengthened and promoted by the Romantics and subsequently adopted by the consuming masses (in the first instance demonstrated by the writers of poems and, more importantly, novels and then learned by their readers).

The imaginative hedonist still needs material objects, but they no longer act just as direct/immediate stimulus to the senses (as a soft cushion, a delicate perfume, a distinguished bottle of wine etc.) but as triggers or rather launch pads and staffage for autonomously induced emotional states in daydreams.

‘Modern hedonism presents all individuals with the possibility of being their own despot, exercising total control over the stimuli they experience, and hence the pleasure they

receive. Unlike traditional hedonism, however, this not gained solely, or even primarily, through the manipulation of objects and events in the world, but through a degree of control over their meaning.' (Campbell 1987: 76)

This is not the invention of a completely new spiritual skill (there always have been virtuosi of the imagination – often finding niches in religious traditions as visionaries and mystics). But it is liberation and democratisation.

This democratisation can be illustrated by the difference between the traditional and the Romantic fairy tale. The latter is distinguished by the (bracketed) knowledge that they are *invented* (*Kunstmärchen*) and therefore could take different turns – and that *it could be you*. [of course there have been precursors here, and I'd regard the story of Sindbad as one of them]. We can here also see the elective [affinity with the capitalist market economy](#). [Sindbad was a trader...]

Money as radically empty incorporates all possibilities equally – due to its 'lack of any content of its own' it is 'the tool that has the greatest possible number of unpredictable uses' (Simmel 1990: 212). Qualitative barriers are torn down – everything that is psychologically possible becomes socially possible. In the modern fairy tale, fantastic novel, movie, video game etc.; all possibilities are open to all – you don't need to be born a princess to end up married to a prince. "Only" quantitative ones are left (but of course, as with money, there is a quantitative barrier even after the removal of the qualitative ones... more on that later). [Daydreams are thus "realistic" in the sense of the realism of character in novels](#) (Alter 1989: 49; Currie 1998: 173)

They may be unrealisable in practical terms, but they are no longer complete impossibilities. They need to be consistent and plausible in terms of character, self-identities. And this, I would claim, is what makes them applicable to everyday problems with transcendence – makes them a likely candidate to fill in the gap left by religious institutions that, in North Western Europe at least, have become ever less relevant.

[as a footnote: in consumer cultures where religious organisations (such as the U.S.A) have managed to remain relevant they have done so by adapting *to* and even adopting the imaginative hedonist mind set – Chris Smith and Melinda Lundquist (2005: 163ff.) speak of a "moral-therapeutic deism".]

Everyday problems of transcendence can thus be processed through the construction (or adoption) of individual styles that structure choices (and not only purchasing choices) creating meaningful links between past and future selves to create/maintain what Luckmann has called a "morally relevant biography" where a socially accountable identity is maintained through temporal change.

Georg Simmel in his 1905 "Philosophy of Fashion" unfolds how the modern fashion cycle with its dialectics of uniformity and difference, [continuity and change affords support to maintaining individual and social identity not only despite continuous change but, in effect, by continuous change](#).

Another example – cigarettes (just because, as Richard Klein (1993) has noted, they have been noted to be "sublime"): purchasing, carrying around, smoking, offering *Gauloise* cigarettes a student can cross-reference geographical links (Paris, Rive Gauche, for example), developmental stage (claim to daring adulthood), future trajectories (setting out to becoming an intellectual), equate and differentiate herself from others with similar and/or differing projects, allegiances; keep that facet of her personality alive later on when she hasn't become an author after all but a lawyer, but "only" a lawyer, but one who has an intellectual side to her... through what Grant McCracken (1988: 110) has called "displaced meaning" in which

'goods help the individual contemplate the possession of an emotional condition, a social circumstance, even an entire style of life, by somehow concretizing these things in themselves. They become a bridge to displaced meaning and an idealized version of life as it should be lived.'

As such autonomous imaginative hedonism (especially as presented by Colin Campbell) may be seen as a solely individualistic way of coming to terms with the minor and major existential crises we all experience not only due to our mortality but the finiteness that is inscribed in the very notion of action. But the imagination which can (Campbell cites Coleridge) “under willing suspension of disbelief” construct alternative scenarios, alternative universes, different societies, has also a socially utopian potential. Science fiction author Arthur C. Clarke (2000: x) once pointed out

‘By mapping possible futures, as well as a good many improbable ones, the science fiction writer does a great service to the community. He encourages in his readers flexibility of mind, readiness to accept and even welcome change – in one word, adaptability.’

This ability can be turned from mere consumption to focus on the conditions of production. [Bandi Mbuli, for example, in his campaign for fairtrade mobile phones, to end the scandalous exploitation of labourers in the tantalum mines, makes use of consumer technologies \(... mobile phones, social networking sites...\) to project alternatives.](#)

So there is ethical potential in the consumer imagination – especially when combined with the fact that for the autonomous imaginative hedonist it is easier to empathise, to place themselves into situations of distant others and get a sense (although of course not the full experience) of the suffering it may involve. Natan Sznaider (2001) has pointed out that the humanitarian sentiment is closely linked to this aspect of capitalism.

But before the emotional implications there is a more compelling (although less obvious) ethical dimension to the imaginative-hedonist response to the problem of transcendence. This becomes visible when we link back consumer romanticism to the structural romanticism of money, i.e. [supplement Colin Campbell’s approach with that of Georg Simmel](#). Money as empty tool refers to an open horizon of possibilities. Even when spent it keeps representing the absent, not chosen choices as not-yet-chosen options. Consumerism is a culture of open horizons, a culture of open possibilities. As a culture of choice the one thing that is abhorred most in consumerism is irreversibility, final commitment.

Now, how could that possibly be a basis for an ethical maxim?

The Catholic/Fascist legal theorist Carl Schmitt (1986: 66) mocked this attitude which is now generalised in small-r romantic consumerism in the original Romantics as their political/moral occasionism – the refusal to commit to any of the projects, dreams, identities constructed in the imagination. As he says here

‘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’

If you consider how easily the dreamers of the absolute on the Right (Carl Schmitt himself, Martin Heidegger and many others) committed to Nazism and how easily the dreamers of the absolute on the Left (Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács and many others) committed to Stalinism, you may accept that there may be some virtue in avoidance (which is why, whatever Adorno says..., totalitarianism is anti-consumerist – consumerist daydreamers don’t make good soldiers, they don’t take to the idea that there’s a cause worth dying for).

But of course a reluctance to make final commitments cannot be in itself ethical as it gets in the way with forming the most basic social bonds which are indispensable for the continuation of any given society: the commitment to the next generation. A problem highlighted by Christian critics of consumerism.(e.g. Williams 2000: 23; Clapp 1998: 194).

One aspect of the religious interpretation of transcendence is the dynamics of probation inherent in the finiteness of existence and freedom of choice (Oevermann 1995). This is a central theme in the story

of the Fall from Paradise whose anthropological essence is captured here by John Milton in *Paradise Lost*:

‘Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall,
 Such I created all th’ Ethereal Powers,
 And Spirits, both them who stood and those who failed,
 Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell.
 Not free, what proof could they have givn sincere,
 Of true allegiance, constant Faith or Love,
 Where onely what they needs must do, appeared,
 Not what they would? what praise could they receive?’

We can only be judged if we are free – we are set free to succeed or fail, so that we can be judged. We are free to choose, but we only have limited time. We need to be able to account for our action in light of the lost alternatives. Traditional institutionalised religion (as opposed to freer forms of heroic individual searching that we find throughout history) used to help us here by providing us with rules and exemplary stories to guide our action, to limit the horizon of the possible/legitimate so as to relieve us from the burden of too much freedom (Dostoyevsky’s Great Inquisitor explains that to Jesus in great breadth...).

Consumerism as a culture of choice presents us with a bit of a problem then.

‘...we might describe contemporary society as materialistic, as a pecuniary culture based on money, as concerned with ‘having’ to the exclusion of ‘being’, as commodified, as hedonistic, as narcissistic or, more positively, as a society of choice and consumer sovereignty.’ (Slater 1997: 24f.)

Consumerism accentuates that problem by detraditionalisation, deregulation and broadening of choice. And given that we use choices to construct identities – choosing the wrong jumper, the wrong toothpaste, the wrong newspaper etc. may undermine our personal integrity.

To an extent we are able to cop out, since, as the former archbishop rightly pointed out, we can lull ourselves in the illusion of general reversibility – of infinite opportunities to recreate, reinvent ourselves (as creative occasionsists).

Consumer culture makes a commitment to the irreversibility of reversibility. But that implies an interesting ethical turn. It is a cultural, a collective choice – and we are obliged to respect the reversibility, the open potential, the creative expressivity in others as much as we feel ourselves entitled to our own. What Émile Durkheim (1898) has called a cult of the individual is not pure egotism, it implies a duty to safeguarding the individuality of others as well as one’s own

‘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.’

I think we can now see how the reluctance to commit as problem is cancelled out by the obligation to safeguard developmental potential – especially in children.

The way we do not abandon children but, historically unique given the ease with which in North-West Europe children used to be chased away, make them the centre of family life (as well as of our financial planning), can be explained by the fact that they incorporate potentiality:

‘Children’s capacity for imagination and fantasy is central to their sacralization’ (Langer 2002: 73)

The anti-heroism, the equally historically unique aversion against killing, can be explained in a similar way. To kill is to delete potential, to cut off development. The classic hero, as he reverberates in Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim* could be said to yearn death on completion of mission as all is done and to live further comes with the risk of reversing achievement, to be dishonoured. The consumer hero, as incorporated here by *Dr Who* wants to live forever and live through many different scenarios. In a way the consumer of stories does that in the imagination (and may find ways to come to terms with their own finitude in “real life” through this)

Attacks on the imagination thence become preludes to attacks on life itself – as the Romantic Heinrich Heine famously stated in 1821

“Where they burn books, so too will they in the end burn human beings.”

In this sense consumerism forms the everyday experience that makes human rights (as religio-ethical codex) intuitively plausible. This is why the reaction to book burning and its equivalents is similar to that once evoked by blasphemy. It *is* blasphemous. And that includes both secular and religious vehicles of the imagination – be it [Pokémon cards in Egypt](#), Harry-Potter books in the US or the burning of the Qur’an by some mad preacher, they are all violations of something *secularly* sacred. Relating to novels, Salman Rushdie (1990) says:

“Literature is the one place in any society where, within the secrecy of our own heads, we can hear *voices talking about everything in every possible way*. The reason for ensuring that that privileged arena is preserved is not that writers want the absolute freedom to say and do whatever they please. It is that we, all of us, readers and writers and citizens and generals and godmen, need that little, unimportant-looking room. We do not need to call it sacred, but we do need to remember that it is necessary”

I would say: From a sociology-of-religion perspective, we should call it “sacred”!

Consumerist anticapitalism

[The autonomous imaginative hedonist is bound to get into conflict with the realities of capitalism. Born out of, and maintained by, the capitalist economic system, consumerism’s ethos must create dissatisfaction with the constraints, inequalities and cruelties produced by the relations of production and the accumulation of capital.](#)

Inequality – which is increasing unabatedly – is not just inequality of wealth, inequality of opportunity – it is inequality of power, it results in relations of domination. The needs, desires and dreams of the rich determine the demand in the labour market – and the demands on labour are increasing with the inequality that goes with the dynamics of capital accumulation. The dissatisfaction with one’s own grey existence is a thorn in the side of capitalism that cannot be pulled out since it cannot exist without consumerism.

“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, 2005)

Let me illustrate this with what I think is one of the cleverest commercials of this year. [Meet Thomson Holiday's "Simon the Ogre"](#) – who both highlights the dissatisfaction with capitalism... and the religious tone of consumer-capitalist responses

In this little clip we've got it all summed up. The clear sense that there is something wrong with capitalism (it dehumanises you – turns you into an ogre unable to relate to significant others, most importantly your children). It offers a therapeutic escape that clearly is formulated in spiritual/religious terms (you undertake a heavenly journey to re-establish your true humanity, to re-establish lost unity, sealed by full-immersion baptism).

And, significantly, it is very clear that it's all lies. My point is that it is *there to be seen*. To begin with, it is clear that this salvation is one that is only temporal (it is to be paid for by the very dehumanisation it offers an escape from), the salvation is also one that is *functional* for the sphere of production (one of the reason the ogrified Simon needs a holiday is that he's no good at his job anymore – he needs to de-ogriify in order to go back into the grey world he escaped from) – and of course there is the question about the humanity and/or ogreity of those who have to make a living by helping Simon with his de-ogriification.

Of course this does not mean that the revolutionary potential will ever be actualised – only that it is there as: a potential. In the meantime, of course, consumerism as it culminates in the tourist experience, works as an ideological veil.

Capitalism is boring and bland and consumerism is the attempt to escape that boredom of a one-dimensional existence. Not as a soteriological event finally realising some eternal truth, but rather as an immanent realisation of the infinite flight of the imagination that the original Romantics developed, using the new liberties brought by the capitalist market – only to find themselves stifled by the emerging eternal monotonies of factory production and bureaucratic administration.

Their project, whose anti-capitalist impetus is maintained in consumerism as anti-producerist appearance, is indeed an occasionist one in more than just the polemic sense Carl Schmitt used in its defamation. It is a promise to recreate the world *differently* from moment to moment to escape the permanent boredom of the eternal recurrence that are the routines of capitalist reproduction. An occasionism that strangely resonates with the theological occasionism of one Ibn al-'Arabi

‘ “Were it not for the renewal of creation at each instant, boredom would overcome the entities, since Nature requires boredom. This requirement decrees that the entities must be renewed. That is why the Messenger of God said about God, “God does not become bored that you should become bored.” So the boredom of the cosmos is identical with the boredom of the Real. But no one in the cosmos becomes bored except him who has no unveiling and does not witness the renewal of creation constantly at each instant and does not witness God as Ever-creating perpetually. [...]”’ (Chittick 1989: 105)

Where an Islamic consumerism is, as is the case in Saudi Arabia, built on the permissibility of excessive hedonism of the traditional type and status consumption we have just that – [non-occasionist, unromantic boredom](#). I would relate this to the fact that the imaginative, the story-telling, the, if you like, romantic aspect of Islam has been stamped out by the religious authorities of the Kingdom in an effort of hyper-rational modernisation. Rules and regulation.

[Where Sufism has survived attempts to suppress it and \(as in the case of Turkey\) has been, under the selective pressures of explicitly secularist regimes, been interiorised and to a degree privatised, the elective affinity to market romance can surface.](#) This can be channelled (as in the self-declared “Islamic Calvinists” of MÜSİAD, the independent tradesmen's and businessmen's association), into a neoliberal producer capitalism as seen in the Anatolian boom under Özal and Erdoğan. But it is also conducive to a self-expressive, individualising Islamic consumer culture that we have seen arising

soon after said boom.

And both young Muslim and secular consumer citizens are increasingly frustrated by the dominance of anti-imaginatively capitalist *Islamist* and *secularist* elites that keep clipping away on their wings. I would dare to claim that the [creativity and the tolerance of the protesters](#) are owed in part to the fact that – although the thing that triggered it all was a shopping mall – they are children of a consumer revolution. While the communist and Islamist anti-capitalists of old were of an ascetic persuasion, we are here dealing with a generation of what Kate Soper called “alternative hedonists” who resent capitalism for the restrictions it lays on the free development of people’s potential to be, at least in their imagination, all they could be.

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