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# iCommunism

COLIN CREMIN



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Capitalism promised us shiny things  
but only communism can deliver them  
in a different, more liberating,  
universal and sustainable form

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Winchester, UK  
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# 0.0 Introduction

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## Even Marxists like to shop

I like the light that reflects on the calm surface of the River Tyne, the same light that reflects on the surface of my new iPad. I am drawn to streets bathed in neon, streets that by day are packed with the books, CDs, DVDs, and those fancy saucepans (the ones in bright colours with heavy bases) that I desire. A junkie to commerce, I was born watching adverts, and despite what I know about all the side effects of production - the exploited labour, waste and environmental degradation – I still consume and consume in excess of my needs. Probably compensating for the anxieties advertisers have manipulated and the alienation at the core of my being, the bind I am in is near universal – at least in the West. In short, I am duped by capital into wanting things I do not need, things that in various ways I have come to depend on even though the costs of consuming them are prohibitive beyond measure. Herbert Marcuse, a trenchant critic of consumerism writing in a more distant age of rising affluence speaks to me and surely many of us when he wrote: ‘the so-called consumer economy and the politics of corporate capitalism have created a second nature of man which ties him libidinally and aggressively to the commodity form.’<sup>1</sup> Commerce has turned us into half-lives, shells of a fuller self and in our identities we have become, if the clichéd phrase ‘I shop therefore I am’ has any truth to it, mirrors of the things desired and consumed. Objects that fill our homes and imaginations fit our identities like gloves because our natures are so bound and stunted by relations of exchange. The so-called consumer society has not liberated the senses so much as retarded them. Austerity threatens their suffocation.

*iCommunism* is a book about consumption and desire, about the degradations of consumerism, the highs and lows, from affluence through to austerity. It is a book about the liberation of the senses, the freeing of the pleasure principle or *Eros* from the institutions of the reality principle: a reality of corruption, brutality, venality, exploitation and soon ecological catastrophe. It is a book on the dirty water in which consumers bathe with a title that steals the lustre from Phones, Pads and Pods, the fetishised lower case i, proposing to bring it under common ownership to liberate the senses from the commodity form and nature from its infernal logic.

## All roads lead to austerity

Whereas consumption is a practice common to cave- and condo-dwellers, consumerism turns consumption into a religion that shapes how an entire people desire, think and socialise. The consumer has no class, gender or ethnicity, no place, depth or distinction. The word *consumer*, said Raymond Williams, ‘is now habitually used by people to whom it ought, logically, to be repugnant.’<sup>2</sup> Not only does the word debase us, it reframes concerns about the world as questions of individual morality.

Consumers have become the scourge of society. It is our crass individualism, selfishness, and greed that so corrodes public life and has contributed to the depletion of planetary resources, the rise of sweatshops in India, and skyrocketing food prices in Africa. And now, by ‘binging on easy credit’ we are also to blame for the economic crisis. Six months after the collapse of Lehman Brothers investment bank, a Washington Post-ABC news poll reported that 7 in 10 Americans held consumers responsible for the economic crisis for having overextended themselves.<sup>3</sup> Barack Obama echoed this sentiment two months later:

One of the causes of this economic crisis was that too many people were living beyond their means.

with mortgages they couldn't afford, buying things they couldn't pay for, maxing out on credit cards that they couldn't pay down... We've contributed to our own problems. We've got to change how we operate. But these practices, they've only grown worse in the midst of this recession, when hardworking Americans can afford them least.<sup>4</sup>

Our hands had been caught in the till, and so it was time to take the punishment. Fast-forward to Greece in 2010. A commentator for the *Guardian* wrote in response to the popular mobilisation against the IMF bailouts that 'it's time to take the pain... we did this to ourselves and there's no choice but to put on a brave face and forge a "New Greece".' March 2011 saw the first national demonstration against public sector cutbacks in Britain. 57% of respondents to a survey commissioned by the *Guardian* thought the cutbacks were necessary.<sup>5</sup> This crisis is a case in which, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, 'desire is shamed, stupefied... it is easily persuaded to deny "itself" in the name of more important interests of civilisation'.<sup>6</sup> The pill of austerity might be bitter, but it is one that people seem all too ready to swallow, if not for economic reasons then at least for ecological ones.

Austerity is our past, the co-present and a possible future. It permeates through all class-based societies: primitive and advanced, capitalist, former communist, and prospective eco-rational. The liberation of the senses that Marcuse advocated has no chance, especially when the alternatives to capitalism appear just as (if not more) repressive than capitalism itself. The imagination lingers on images of bread queues and weatherworn faces from a 'really existing' socialist past; an alternative that no sensuous being would aspire to. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century there are only the faintest of echoes of utopia when, on Saturdays in town, more dogmatic socialists compete with cranks for the attention of passing shoppers. The imagination suffers from these assaults. It is beaten into submission by the tableau of colourful products in shop window displays. And if cynicism has blocked one utopia, the checkout has blocked another. Yet there is an alternative to what Mark Fisher calls 'capitalist realism' – the presupposition that the market is the only game in town – and that alternative does not have to be mapped to austerity, whether justified on economic or ecological grounds. The alternative can be something altogether shinier and joyful.

### **Critics of consumerism have hitherto only wanted us to tighten our belts in various ways; the point is to burn them**

Critiques of the consumer society make for pretty grim reading; this one is no exception. Herbert Marcuse's *One-dimensional Man* described a totally administered world of people who identify with their home appliances. Henri Lefebvre wrote about the commodification of everyday life. But there was hope between the lines. For Marcuse, the technological means of enslaving people could, under different circumstances, liberate society from alienated labour and reorient the erotic base of culture towards the life instincts; eros, in other words. Lefebvre saw the city as a contradictory space of possibility. Paris in 1871, when the Communards transformed the centre into a short-lived experiment in self-determination; or in 1968, when students and workers became, for a brief time, the agents of history: these sparks of possibility coruscate today in the streets and on the squares of Cairo, Athens and New York. Walter Benjamin, Marxist critic of early 20<sup>th</sup> Century society, styled his life on the great 19<sup>th</sup> Century poet Charles Baudelaire, the archetypal *flâneur* stalking the Parisian streets and arcades. He said of Baudelaire: 'with each step, the walk takes on greater momentum; ever weaker grow the temptations of bistros, of shops, of smiling women, ever more irresistible the magnetism of the next street corner, of a distant square in the fog, of the back of a woman walking before him. Pleasures in which only the most affluent could indulge remind us of how unequal and unjust society

is, and moreover, of what might be possible if class relations were overturned and the forces of production brought under common ownership. Later the fantasy was rationalised, recycled and reduced to a standard that an emergent 'mass' consumer could afford. Arcades were bulldozed, and in their place the now-ubiquitous shopping mall rose.

Marcuse, Lefebvre and Benjamin were not the sort of critics to call upon people to tighten their belts. They recognised that humans are sensuous beings. They recognised, as Marx had before them, that in a society divided by relations of class, power, and privilege, sensuous life has been cut from the body and pasted to the commodity, priced beyond what so many can afford.

### **i, the non-commodified no-logo**

The senses have been rained on by cluster bombs of commodities. Countries have become brand names; cities have become supermarkets; homes have become show houses; people have become consumers. Logos turn into dollars. As Naomi Klein pointed out, logos are worth more than the material holdings of the companies they identify. Nike, for example, outsources production to manufacturers in low-wage economies and concentrates the bulk of their investment on creating brand awareness. The Nike swoosh logo has become a universally recognisable symbol of sportswear, training shoes, fitness, celebrity, quality and cool. Though what about that ubiquitous lower case i we associate with Apple products? It is a strange kind of sign which, unlike the swoosh, cannot be trademarked; it is properly held in common that other companies can use, perhaps to grace their products and services with a little piece of that Apple magic. It is a signifier on the edge of the void, dancing with and between commodities, never becoming a billion-dollar logo tradable on stock markets. It is a commodity today and free-floating sign tomorrow, a symbol of the excessive little something that distinguishes the iPhone from an ordinary phone, iGoogle from ordinary Google. It is this excess that *iCommunism* proposes we wrest from the commodity altogether, to liberate pleasure from the shopping experience from desire's dirty association with the market – consumerism – a system that survives through the constant turnaround of products bought and paid for by labour, the libido, and ultimately the planet.

The book does not battle against consumption per se, but rather the capitalist form of consumption to which desires have become knotted. The battle here is to wrest the i of Eros from the commodity and to transfer it to a word that evokes images of hardship and asceticism rather than abundance and joy. *iCommunism* unties the knot of capitalist production and subjective desire. It splits fetishism from commodity fetishism, use-value from exchange-value, and identifies an adaptive human nature in place of a selfish and instrumental nature; politics proper from the palliatives of ethical and economic consumption.

Commune, the commons, community – whatever it signified in the past, communism is an open concept, an eternal Idea says Alain Badiou; an historical anchoring point 'of everything elusive, slippery and evanescent',<sup>8</sup> an idea which has demonstrated, in all-too-brief moments of liberation, the possibility of an alternative to the market economy; 'to parliamentary democracy – the form of state suited to capitalism – and the inevitable and 'natural' character of the most monstrous social inequalities.'<sup>9</sup> If ordinary communism is about equality, justice and self-determination, a social-justice, worker-owned and rationally planned economy, *iCommunism* is also about pleasure: the proposition that it is possible to create a material foundation for the universal liberation of the senses – of playfulness and an aesthetic life: that the 'excessive' flourishes upon functions (what the i signifies to the phone) and the joyfulness that justifies the sacrifices that we collectively need to make in order to realise a vision of communism wholly distinguishable from the nightmare worlds of capitalism and really existing socialism.

The book is organised into five short chapters on capitalism, consumption and the consumer as subject. Chapter 1.0 *Addiction* is about desire and false needs, drawing on Marx, Lacan, Adorno and



Horkheimer and others to offer some explanation as to how subjective desires and capitalism have become so bound together. 2.0 *Excess* discusses the economy and ecology, the uneven nature of consumption, divisions between rich and poor, and in particular, the environmental consequences of mass consumption. 3.0 *Identification* is about standardisation, the denigration of our freedoms and the emptiness of our choices, challenging the idea that the Internet liberates the consumer from the rationalised one-dimensionality of consumerism. 4.0 *Conscience* discusses ethical and ecological forms of consumption, questioning whether there is any ethical or ecological value whatsoever in individual gestures to reduce dependency on consumer products. 5.0 *Commons* is about liberation.

# 1.0 Addiction

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## **Between wants and needs**

What is a need? While there might be some disagreement among postmodernists, a materialist would argue that food is a need. What about art or love? Do we need science? Animals get by without. Human needs are complex and not simply reducible to bodily functions. Yet people are constantly judged for buying things that exceed a narrow definition of need. Consumerist ideologies, which oppose any attempt to regulate consumption, are pitted against anti-consumerist ideologies advocating boycotts, self-sufficiency and so forth, strategies that do little more than make us feel good about ourselves while structurally changing nothing. This chapter explores the relationship between capitalism and desire, drawing on a number of theorists to offer an explanation as to why mass marketed objects have such a hold over us. The aim is to discern a difference between fetishes and fetishised commodities; use-value and exchange-value; desire and self-interest; needs proper to humankind and needs, let us dare to say, that are false.

## **1.1 M-C-M<sup>i</sup>**

### **The strangest of fetishes are those that have been normalised**

According to Freud, it is not need, as such, that motivates us but rather the anticipation of (libidinal) pleasure from the satisfaction of needs - if hungry we tend to think of a cooked meal rather than a raw cabbage and if thirsty a flavoured drink rather than a glass of water. Ejected from a womb that drips milk and feeds our desires, we enter a world in which desires are frustrated and gratifications delayed; a world in which the archetypal Father competes for the mother's attention. Rather than fixed biological categories, words such as father and mother can be thought of as linguistic placeholders that mark power dynamics in a patriarchal society. The Father can be a sign for any social authority with the power to punish and the Mother the object of desire. In a society obsessed with consumption, consumer goods become fetishised objects of desire.

One of Freud's male patients developed a fetish for the shine on women's noses. The shine compensated for a fear of castration as according to Freud fetishes help men come to terms with the fact that women have no penis (woman is essentially 'castrated'). While other men go through all the bother of courtship before consummating their desire, the fetishist gets instant though fleeting gratification, in this case from the serendipitous effect of light on a reflective surface. 'Penis' signifies power or possession and 'castration' powerlessness or lack. The shine makes up for feelings of powerlessness, an object or substitute 'penis' that can triumphantly if only momentarily be possessed. There is a permanent tension here between possession and loss, a pleasure sustained by disavowed fear like the frightened child who peeks through half-closed fingers at a scene they secretly delight in. Commodities possess their own shine: an equally fleeting, ultimately dissatisfying colour, shape and texture compensating for what, perhaps unconsciously, we feel to be lacking in our lives. They compensate for feelings of powerlessness and alienation, allowing us to forget for a moment the issues that weigh heavily on our minds.

We only buy things because they have a use to us, and while a shiny nose might be of 'use' to one person it has no use to another. Consumer goods possess a use-value for the person buying them, otherwise they would not want them - and an exchange-value or monetary price bearing little or no relation to their intrinsic or subjective value. The exchange-value does not account for the sacrifice

made by so many people to bring goods and services to market. Yet despite what we know about working conditions in India or the carbon emissions of air freight, most of us have no choice other than to buy the cheapest equivalent item available. Our wages, our conditions of life, force this upon us. For everyone, price becomes the ultimate determinant of value, and so however we view it, what Marx called commodity fetishism hooks us all. Whatever our belief or desire, in a society enveloped in capitalist relations of exchange, it is impossible to avoid being active in those relations. Whatever we think about money, we are forced to act as if money possesses value. Commodities, whether the apples we eat or the Apples we surf the net on, are polished up by cheap labour. The shine that bounces off their surfaces dazzles and blinds us to the circumstances of their creation, the castrated human and environmental circuitry of real and virtual cornucopias. The fetish for commodities is universal and there is nothing – not even sessions on Freud’s couch – that we can do about it, at least individually.

### **Human nature is an unfinished project**

The commodity has vacuumed sensuous life from the fabric of being, leaving in its wake a husk of personality that the market has priced up; a husk of what Marx called our species being - the vital powers, dispositions, capacities and drives that distinguish humans from animals. As Marx said: ‘what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the [honeycomb] cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax.’<sup>1</sup> We have become strangers to ourselves. In place of sensuality we see objects, we even see ourselves as commodities. Consider this advice to a job candidate from a career site:

When a company is determining how to advertise their products to consumers, they focus on its unique selling points - the things which make the product different from any other. It may be that it is smaller, lasts longer or tastes better than its competitors. The same principle applies to you when you are applying for a new job.<sup>2</sup> (Monster.co.uk career advice)

We confront the market as free independent labourers forced to see ourselves as potential assets that capital can use up and discard when it no longer requires them. Alienation stems from the fact that the creative capacity, intellect and emotions of individuals are indexed to capital. Instead of work being a source of pleasure and spiritual satisfaction, it becomes a burden. The vital force of creation becomes an object of exchange as those around us become competitors grubbing about for jobs they probably deserve as much as we do. We reflect on ourselves, the capacities of the body, the emotions, drives and experiences that shape identity. But this becomes an instrumental process, most evident in how we construct our CVs: thinking about the skills employers want, the value of doing voluntary work, the benefits of the networks we belong to, and how personal attributes will affect job prospects. We are robbed of our social agency, acting only as agents of capital and seeing the world through its imagined eyes, justifying our place in society on its terms. Numbers dance around us. Is a university education a value for money? – *Does it meet the needs of industry?* - Do the Greeks deserve a bailout? Has an immigrant earned the right to remain? Numbers degrade us. They price up personality, life experience and love. Even the planet has a price. CO<sub>2</sub> becomes an object of exchange through carbon trading schemes while the ‘bill’ for global warming is expected to reach £250 billion by 2050. States are spurred into action only when profit is jeopardised, the results rarely benefitting those who dwell in the flood plains.

Fredric Jameson writes, ‘no society has ever been quite so addictive, quite so inseparable from the condition of addictiveness as this one, which did not invent gambling, to be sure, but which did invent compulsive consumption.’<sup>3</sup> The more life is commodified, the greater the need to compensate for the

profound loss incurred to the individual and society in general, and the more, up to a point, we become addicted to consumption. We are locked into a vicious cycle of working in order to get the fix that compensates for our alienation.

### **Capitalism has tied the knot with Eros; the commodity is the glint in our loving eye**

We turned stone into wheels and minerals into microchips, and in these processes of thought and creation a different kind of individual was cultivated, one irreconcilable with our forebears. But only a certain kind of nature is suited to capitalism at this intense 'late capitalist' phase of commodity production: a nature made to sweat for consumption.

Unless crafting them into a candle first, a candle-maker is unlikely to sell the materials she bought – the wax, wick and mould – for more than she paid for them. However, through the power of her labour she transforms wax into a candle and adds value to the materials purchased. Whether a shoe factory in Indonesia or a shoe shop in Inverness, every firm operates according to this principle. But whereas our self-employed candle-maker kept the additional value she created, the additional value the worker creates translates into profit or surplus-value for owners and shareholders, some of which is reinvested into expanding the business, taxation and diminishing surplus wages for workers to pay for diminishing surplus consumption. No matter how sophisticated the operation grows, it remains dependent on labour. Without labour machines are idle, materials go to waste and there is no opportunity to make profit. This is why strikes are so disruptive and governments so hostile to them. They literally stop capital in its tracks.

The whole process of capitalist accumulation is a circular and self-expanding motion from production through to consumption and back again. Marx called this cycle M-C-M'. When businesses invest money into commodities such as machinery and labour they speculate on making a high return. The 'M' or money component of the formula is the investment that kicks off the cycle, the money to buy the wick, wax and mould, and the labour power that turns it all into a commodity 'C' – the 'candle'. The wager is that a consumer will buy the candle or service or whatever, and if they do the money enters back into circulation, the second 'M' in the formula. So what does the dash after the second M represent? This is profit derived from labour, the surplus-value that enables capital not only to circulate but also to expand. The excess creamed off labour drives capitalism forward, enabling it to span the globe and absorb life to the point of exhaustion: killing, conquering and colonising. Lacan relates this endless process of capitalist accumulation of surplus-value to what he called surplus-enjoyment, the self-exploitation of libidinal drives: an excess of desire, a *jouissance* or pleasure derived when grasping for the shine but never, of course, capturing it.

We can think about the object of desire as a kind of spoiler. Consider the pleasure we get from going to the movies. The last things we want to hear before seeing a film are 'spoilers'. These are the crucial plot developments typically towards the end of the film when the mystery is revealed, such as the identity of the murderer in the crime thriller genre. The suspense (and therefore the satisfaction) would be 'spoiled' if we knew the identity in advance. The mystery and the bungling attempts of the detective to uncover it drives the narrative and sustains our enjoyment, the enjoyment that is also dissatisfaction. There is no pleasure after all in having the mystery prematurely revealed to us, hence why we call such revelations spoilers. Lacan extends this principle to subjectivity in general. (Dis)satisfaction derives from every frustrated attempt to uncover the identity, to possess the knowledge or object that drives our desire. We are driven by a desire to possess something that we feel to be lacking in our lives, the mystery, the missing thing, 'it', or *objet petit a* – shine – always beyond our grasp. Desire circulates around the missing thing, never quite capturing it. Surplus-enjoyment is the excessive insatiable drive that hits against the obstacle and gets off on it. Surplus-

value is the objet petit a of capital, that little missing thing causing the mad destructive drive for profit and insatiable need for workers-cum-consumers to keep the entire circuit in motion. Without an actual consumer to consume the accumulated value, it cannot be translated into money or liquid assets to be used for expansion. It is essential for capitalism's survival that the consumer is ultimately dissatisfied with their purchases and so therefore has a perpetual need to consume more. Slavoj Žižek nicely illustrates the point with the example of caffeine-free Diet Coke, a product with no nutritional value and with a strange, bittersweet taste. Coke is marketed as empty, it literally is the Real Thing and now with Coca-Cola Zero the truth is in the branding. Žižek writes:

The more Coke you drink, the thirstier you are; the more profit you make, the more you want; the more you obey the superego command [to enjoy], the guiltier you are [for failing to satisfy your desire and therefore the command to enjoy].<sup>4</sup>

The economic crisis puts a different spin on this. There is a more obvious material obstacle in the way of the perpetually delayed satisfaction of desire. Depressed wages and the lack of available credit stop us from buying the Coca-Cola equivalent in the first place. When the young, disenfranchised and unemployed - the invisible - riot on the streets of London, Manchester and other cities in reaction to police brutality, smashing a shop window and stealing the product is sometimes the most realistic solution to the satisfaction of a need that was long ago manufactured.

So bound are our pleasures with consumption that to be denied opportunities to consume and consume excessively is, as is often said, like being denied a human right. Capitalism's drive for profit becomes knotted to the subjective drive for enjoyment. The entwinement is so tragic, so destructive and so empty. The problem is not that we desire 'excessively' but rather that what we desire has enslaved us to capital. Alienated in the first instance from our species being, we become cannibals of our own creations, first producing value in excess of remuneration in wage (surplus-value) and secondly by consuming value in an endless quest to satisfy a libidinal drive (surplus-enjoyment). Capitalism cannot survive without 'it' but the subject can survive – even flourish – without capitalism.

Today, though, it is hard to see through the fog of so-called consumer society and the myth that humans are merely selfish, wasteful, shallow, and destructively excessive. It is no wonder that the utopian imagination is so destitute when human nature is made to look so grubby. But a species that can design a rocket ship to fly to the moon is no more of an animal than a fish is a reptile. If a species can imagine flight and then build airplanes, it can imagine a better world and become the historic agent in the making of that world. It can overcome hardship and inequality, and it can create a sustainable environment in which all of us – Americans, Africans, Indians, Chinese – can thrive. Systems can be overturned when people confront their alienated condition, but cynicism prevails in the absence of a more benign notion of human nature.

Recovering use-value from relations of exchange entails the recovery of the vital, adaptive thinking kernel of being and putting it to the service of our social needs rather than the needs of capital; in short it means recovering our humanity. It also means recovering a faith in a capacity all of us possess – perhaps even bankers and politicians – to transcend a condition born from the alienated relations that are, as Marx said, directly encountered and inherited from the past. It means having faith in humanity. Alain Badiou writes:

If you think the world can and must change absolutely; that there is neither a nature of things to be respected nor preformed subjects to be maintained, you thereby admit that the individual may be sacrificable. Meaning that the individual is not independently endowed with any intrinsic nature that would deserve our striving to perpetuate it.<sup>5</sup>

Defaults and dole queues are the collective hangover from a long consumer boom. But consumption remains the cure for overproduction and the individual palliative priced beyond the means of those in debt or on wages at the borderline of subsistence. Desire is still chasing the hair of the dog that bit us.

## 1.2 False Needs

### There are needs and there are false needs and there are needed false needs

Our natures have changed. We cannot be satisfied with the desires of the archetypal cave dweller. We want more and we deserve it, collectively at least: needs, then, are historically contingent. Agrarian societies need shovels. A society rationalised in the interests of commerce needs Playstations. In 1957 Vance Packard published *The Hidden Persuaders*, a seminal work on the advertising industry. He cited a number of examples of how advertisers manufacture affinities between people and products. In one case, housewives were asked to report on which of three detergents they thought worked best, unaware that the only difference between them was the colour of the box. The detergent in the yellow box was reported to be too strong, the blue too weak and the one in the box coloured yellow and blue to be just right, 'wonderful' even. Goldilocks had found her porridge. The conclusion advertisers drew was that consumers make choices by discriminating *irrationally* between what are essentially the same products. We buy feelings rather than functions. Adorno and Horkheimer came to the same conclusion about the cultural manipulators they called the Culture Industry. Consumer goods, they said, are like mass-produced Yale locks, the difference between them 'measured in fractions of millimetres'.<sup>6</sup> The advertiser has turned miniscule differences into fetishes, and by identifying with differences that are essentially the same, we become a pallid version of the self: what Adorno and Horkheimer called a pseudo-individual, much like the 'one-dimensional man' of Marcuse who 'swallows up' her alienated existence by identifying with the things she consumes. Consider how the late Steve Jobs, the former CEO of Apple, pitched the iPhone 4:

Now, this is really hot ... you got to see this thing in person, it's one of the most beautiful designs you've ever seen ... glass on the front and rear, stainless steel running around ... its closest kin like a beautiful old Leica camera.

Jobs conjured an affinity between the subject and object, selling us a warm feeling; perhaps one we associate with childhood. The libido is wrapped into Apple's aesthetic. The reflective surface on the iPhone returns an image of the ego protected by the hard steel casing: an image of the Leica protecting an otherwise fragile self. We were lost and now we recover our identity, only for it to disappear again – until reimagined in versions 5, 6 and 7.

The culture industry is not a particular set of manufacturers, but rather a broad range of cultural manipulators – including advertisers, the film industry and the mass media in general – which, in various ways, directly and indirectly, stoke and manipulate feelings of anxiety. They manufacture false needs, first by pointing out deficiencies we did not know we had, and then by providing solutions to them: a cream to heal blemishes, a stupid set of saucepans with which to impress dinner guests, a self-help guide for improving social skills. People are not passive dupes responding mechanically to media messages; 'they desire a deception which is nonetheless transparent to them', as Adorno wrote.<sup>7</sup> They desire the missing feeling, the warmth and love we all crave and others boring into the soul in simulated 3D appear to have found.

The culture industry is the machinery that does the job of connecting surplus-value with surplus enjoyment, but on a mass scale – explaining why so many of us share the same fetishistic desire for certain consumer goods. By presenting objects as fillers for feelings of alienation and anxiety, the

machinery connects capital's insatiable drive for profit with the subject's insatiable drive for satisfaction. And because everyone desires, regardless of how poor or wealthy they are, everyone can be made to feel deprived, to have a legitimate need for something. By manufacturing false needs the culture industry is able to make even the affluent feel deprived, feel the pinch of austerity by having cut down on the designer labels that confirm their status in the eyes of significant others. Humans adapt to their environment and develop another kind of nature – a second nature. We have adapted to the demands of the culture industry. And so those who buy facile creams, have 'boob jobs', drive around in 'performance' vehicles, really do feel the need for them – really do feel inadequate without them. The addicted go to rehab, but rehab for the consumer is located in a different kind of society, one that is not penetrated by a culture industry or equivalent, not a society of 'mass deception', not Soviet Russia, not Nazi Germany, not sham liberal-parliamentary democracies.

While feelings of anxiety and inadequacy are not peculiar to capitalism, the global-scale manipulation of these feelings surely is. We can discern a difference between consumption under capitalism – in which that consumption fuels capitalist expansion and profit – and consumption in a society in which the means of production are socially owned and utilised for social and of course individual needs. Would women in a communist society feel inadequate over their breast size or men their sexual performance? Almost certainly. But would so many people experience these same anxieties and need a particular product to compensate for them, the wonder drug, the wonder bra, the wonder car? People will always want to live in beautiful homes and dress in ways that others find aesthetically pleasing. But there is a difference between this desire and an ego whose sense of self is secure only when accumulating stuff; whose aesthetic judgements are determined by fashion alone.

### **M-C-M<sup>i</sup> is the formula of consumerism**

The farmer has stumbled into one of the more affluent parts of town. His peasant tunic is swapped for a designer sweater. The produce he sells is fresh and organic and the logos emblazoned on the labels endorse the authenticity of his claim of having been kind to the soil, chickens and hired hands. Plan organic is a utopia in embryo, a utopia that comes at a price few can afford. Only in a society where a day is an aspiration, not a reality, can such a smorgasbord of earthly delights be so desirable and yet so exclusive. The fresh lettuce, the organic tomato, the state-of-the-art gadget, the street cool and the ubiquitous i plucked from the hand and heart are quickly transported to market before they go rotten. The i has become the symbol of freshness, cool, individuality, information, that little bit of extra something, the mystery – *objet petit a* – that drives our desire. It is the surplus-value stolen from the worker, the Apple polished and fetishised for consumption, the shine on the nose of commodities: the i of Eros. The excess of capital becomes bound up with the excess of human desire which together form consumerism represented here by the formula M-C-M<sup>i</sup>. It is a bind that needs untying if the excess of human desire is to be liberated and become *productive* creative excess no longer connected to the instrumental demands of capital. The human and environmental impact of the bind that entwines surplus-value and surplus-enjoyment, and the uneven nature of consumption, is the focus of the next chapter.



## 2.0 Excess

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### *The advertising slogans for Pepsi-Cola sound out above the collapse of continents (Adorno and Horkheimer)*

Let us put excessive consumption into perspective and give it an identity, first with a little preamb from the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. In the novels of Rabelais, Bakhtin wrote, the peasantry celebrated the end of the harvest with a 'banquet for all the world'. Their produce results from the collective efforts of an entire community, a common wealth exceeding the harvest of individual labour. The banquet was therefore a celebration of a body that had transgressed its material limits. By contrast the banquets of bourgeois literature celebrated:

the contentment and satiety of the selfish individual, his personal enjoyment, and not the triumph of the people as a whole... it is no longer the "banquet for all the world," in which all take part, but an intimate feast with beggars at the door.<sup>1</sup>

No longer touching base with the collective efforts of community, excess has gotten a bad name. Restaurants in the UK close at a rate of 100 per month, while the Taybarns buffet chain is taking the restaurant industry by storm with their recession busting slogan: 'Enjoy as much as you like, as many times as you like. All for one fixed price!' The all-you-can-eat buffet is the modern equivalent of the medieval banquet, now symbolising a socially disconnected individual: a body that has been politically, economically, socially and culturally denuded. One customer explains why buffets are so compulsive: "When I come here I pig out. I feel like I have to because there's such a selection and I don't want to miss out".<sup>2</sup> Fear lingers between the lines. The peasant feared the elements, the modern worker fears being priced out of the market and losing out on a good deal, relative of course to their income. We have all become beggars at the door, the door of international finance, grasping in vain for a piece of the highlife captured in the Boxing Day sale refrain: 'I am desperate to get a Gucci handbag'.<sup>3</sup> The all-you-can-eat buffet is the banquet at the end of the world.

Excessive consumption is obviously a relative concept. It is when we compare the excesses of the dominant elite to the blowouts of the Tayburn's customer that matters are brought into perspective. Thorstein Veblen's fin de siècle classic *Conspicuous Consumption* was about bourgeois ostentation. Today's elites display their wealth on a scale that exceeds that of the Pharaohs with their pyramids and the Victorians with their town halls. Today, reflective towers rise above the clouds in Dubai, Mumbai and Shanghai, ostentations of one class that to another languishing in their shadows is mere obscenity. While cheap laughs are had observing the vulgarity of the working class in the freak show of reality TV, little compares to the vulgarity at Bugis Junction, Singapore, where a US \$1 million diamond-studded Christmas tree is on seasonal display; a fraction of the cost of the US \$11.4m tree at the Emirates Palace hotel. The super-rich can buy a floating Monaco featuring scaled-down version of the Monte Carlo Casino and racetrack,<sup>4</sup> while the once-affluent consumer is slung out of their home in Florida.<sup>5</sup> In an alternate but all too familiar reality, the first '\$1 Billion Home' with its 27 storeys of opulence rises over the squalor of Mumbai.<sup>6</sup>

The contrasts between the consumption of one class and that of another are so great that they lead us to question why the phrase 'consumer society' is used with such abandon. Most people in the 'consumer society' played no part in the decision-making processes that led to the global financial crisis. Most



us have no voice in the affairs of state or self-determination in the workplace. For many people consumption is an aspiration not a reality. The consumer society is more than convenient shorthand for describing a norm; it is an ideological device that turns all consumers – whether they live on the mean streets of Baltimore or the leafy avenues of the Hamptons – into one another's equivalent, thereby disguising the economic and political power that divides them. Consumption is a class issue. This chapter is on the material divisions and social and environmental consequences of the capitalist form of consumption.

## 2.1 Blow Out

### **There is no such thing as scarcity; austerity prevails**

In 2010 the anonymous blogger 'Austerity Mum', later revealed to be the millionaire Lisa Unwin, made headlines with her advice on how to survive the recession. This was the year when austerity, defined as 'forced or extreme economy', was the Merriam-Webster Dictionary's most widely searched word.<sup>7</sup> Austerity is necessary when trekking across the desert with only a flask of water. Late capitalism is no desert though; shelves are stacked high and warehouses are overflowing. The only quantity in short supply is the consumer. In this world of absurdities, deserts of scarcity are manufactured. Within them are oasis enclaves gushing with water on tap and supermarket shelves groaning with bottles of water taken from distant springs.

Among the sins of the industrialised model of food consumption is the spread of diabetes and rising levels of obesity wherever fast food chains get a foothold. 350 million people around the world today are diabetic.<sup>8</sup> These are boom times for the fitness industry, the dieting industry, and now the gastric bypass surgery industry. Stomach stapling, according to one US clinic, can shave off as much as 200 pounds; a necessary measure in a country where 300,000 people die from symptoms of morbid obesity every year. This contrasts starkly to developing countries where 27-28% of all children are underweight or stunted through malnutrition.<sup>9</sup> In private consumption, the wealthiest 20% of the global population consume 76.6% of all consumable goods, while the poorest 20% consume just 1.5%.<sup>10</sup> All consumers are equal but some can make austerity a lifestyle choice.

Austerity chic was the fashion of 2008. Fearful of bumping into a picket line of redundant workers, the sensitive 'recessionista' ditched the 'bling' for dark coloured cashmeres lying idle in the closet. While the masses had been shaken, they had not been stirred – and so seasons change, with springtime coming early for some. In the first quarter of 2010, a 13% jump in sales of Louis Vuitton handbags took 'analyst's breath away' according to the *Guardian*. Good news comes in spades. The world's biggest luxury consumer firm LVMH saw champagne sales jump 20%; watch and jewellery sales also soared by 34%.<sup>12</sup> The luxury goods sector is recession-proof; as one newspaper columnist put it: 'rich people might be ruthless and smug, but they make terrific customers.'<sup>13</sup>

The poorer countries of the world have to produce 40% more goods today than they did in 1977 to purchase the equivalent from richer countries.<sup>14</sup> In an era of combined and uneven consumption, the evident disparity in purchasing power between nations cuts across all societies: 'consumer' and 'producer' alike.

Take China, for example – the great white hope of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – sliding down the UN human development index ever since the start of its economic miracle (we never hear the phrase social miracle). China ranks 92<sup>nd</sup> in the index, while Cuba, a country crippled by a half-century-long US trade embargo, ranks 52<sup>nd</sup>.<sup>15</sup> And the 'factory of the world' is likely to remain just that – a factory with no mass consumer society on the horizon, given that 1.3 billion of its people eke out an existence on an average of just \$285 a year.<sup>16</sup> And so by producing more than it consumes, China simply adds

the heap of goods western consumers can no longer afford to purchase.

Let us pose the question: are we really 'all in this together', as David Cameron suggests? Do we need to make a 'shared sacrifice' as Barack Obama tells us? Not according to the American Right. Al Rush Limbaugh put it when defending the excesses of the rich, 'we do not believe in shared sacrifice ...—once again, I think the guy is losing it!'<sup>17</sup> The Left could learn something here.

### **There is always a crisis of consumption**

The roots of the current economic crisis can be traced back to before neoliberalism and the relaxation of restrictions on the free-flow of financial capital. The crisis is a result of a longer-term structural crisis of over-accumulation, too much stuff produced for too little demand. As unemployment and underemployment increases, jobs become less secure and there is a downward pressure on wages further undermining consumer demand. Credit was a temporary solution to wage repression, as it allowed those affected to borrow money – in effect to keep capital in circulation. Credit gave substance to the claim that we live in a consumer society.

The figures on the transfer of wealth from the poorest to the richest provide some background on our dependence on credit. In 1979 the richest 1% of the UK population owned 8.9% of the wealth. By 2006 the figure was 22.8%.<sup>18</sup> The poorest quarter of American households survive on about \$50 a day, at least 40% or more of this wealth services interest on debt.<sup>19</sup> As a consequence of neoliberalism, wages have been squeezed as productivity levels rise, with the financial sector siphoning off chunks of wealth in the form of interest payments. With a significant amount of productive output geared towards mass consumption, the super-rich still depend on a buoyant consumer market for their wealth. However, the institutions and laws that protected wages, working conditions and welfare have been systematically dismantled by neoliberal regimes. This has not only made people more vulnerable, but has also threatened the survival of the consumerist model of capitalist accumulation. Simply put, people no longer have the purchasing capacity to 'spend their way' out of recession. George W. Bush, worried about the economic downturn after the 9/11 attacks, was in a position to say 'Get out there and shop. It's the American way' because the US Fed under Alan Greenspan could reduce interest rates on loans and expect a consumer boom to result.<sup>20</sup> Such calls fall on deaf ears when there is no credit or wage capacity to finance loans.

By 2007 total personal debt in the US was around \$14,374.5 billion<sup>21</sup> and in the UK around £1,435 billion.<sup>22</sup> The average family debt in the UK is now expected to reach £77,000 by 2015.<sup>23</sup> While the very wealthiest lost £155 billion worth of assets during the crash, a year later the combined wealth of the richest 1,000 people in the UK rose by a record breaking 30%.<sup>24</sup> The poorest households bore the brunt of the crisis. Since the crash, unemployment has soared in the US and UK. By 2011, before the cull in public sector jobs came into effect, there were 2.4 million unemployed in the UK, the highest figure since 1984.<sup>25</sup>

There are stories behind these figures that are never told, stories about immigrants forced into prostitution; single mothers juggling two jobs to support a family; graduate students on low-paid contracts with few prospects of permanent work; highly skilled and experienced professionals made redundant at the prime of their working lives; those requiring care forced onto the streets and those compensating for cuts in public services by working longer hours to provide crucial services. There are the underemployed, contract and casual workers. There is nothing left to sacrifice here, not for the economy or even for the planet.

## **2.2 Capitocene**

### **The geological age of capital**

From Kyoto to Copenhagen, the aggregate amount of carbon emissions pumped into the atmosphere has risen year on year, a trend bucked only in 2009 when the global economy was in a recession. 2010 made up for this though with the largest yearly output of carbon emissions on record, leading the International Energy Agency to declare that global warming can no longer be contained at safe levels.<sup>27</sup> James Hansen has warned of ecological tipping points, such as the melting Arctic sea ice or the release of methane from Siberia's frozen tundra that would cause amplifying and unpredictable feedbacks throughout the entire biosphere. The human impact on the environment is now thought so great as to equate to what happened to the dinosaurs when an asteroid plunged into the Gulf of Mexico at the end of the Cretaceous period. Now for the first time in Earth's history biological life is triggering a mass extinction event ushering a new geological age called the Anthropocene.

Humans have been around for 1000s of years. Yet it is only in the past 200 or so years with the development of capitalism and large-scale industry that sustainability has become a planetary wide issue. Industrial development has not in itself led to this condition but rather the unplanned and exploitative manner in which the forces of production are utilised for the purposes of securing private gain. The capitalist mode of production is sustained through expansion and expands by using up human and natural resources disrupting the established harmony between humans and nature causing what Marx called a metabolic rift. The problem then with the term Anthropocene – anthro as in human – is that it signifies humans in general as the destructive cause of rising carbon emissions. It implies that we are all 'in it together', that we all, by definition of being human, share an equal responsibility for the state of the environment and all therefore have to make sacrifices, take fewer flights or, if you happen to live in Africa, have fewer babies. These are sacrifices, in other words, for sustaining capitalism with an eco-friendly face. But it needs to be remembered that most of us have little determination over our lives, least of all the economy, and those few who can afford to make conscientious decisions about what or how much they consume are not going to have any effect on aggregate levels of carbon emissions by 'going green' or, for that matter, living amongst nature eating nuts and berries. It is not then the human species as such that causes global warming but a specific mode of production, accumulation and exchange. The capitalist laws of motion set in train a mass extinction event, the extinction of species, industries, livelihoods, communities and hope. At the speed of a juggernaut, no an asteroid, capitalism blisters the earth, sets forests aflame and triggers metaphorical earthquakes and tsunamis. It has forced scarcity upon the planet's inhabitants, the fish of the open seas, animals of the open plains, people of the enclosed commons, in order to preserve the wealth and power of a tiny elite, less even than 1% of the global population. This is not a geological age triggered by an indeterminate human but rather the geological age of capital, the Capitocene. Without a change in the social relations of production profit will always trump planet and the technological means to address global warming and end a condition of scarcity will be squandered.

Scarcity is an excuse, Marcuse wrote, that since its inception has justified institutional repression but 'weakens as man's knowledge and control over nature enhances the means for fulfilling human needs with a minimum of toil.'<sup>28</sup> But the excuse still convinces. Scarcity of jobs becomes a problem of immigration, scarcity of credit a problem of individual greed and scarcity of natural resources a problem of overpopulation. As long as there is capitalism there is no end to scarcity, no end to the need for austerity. The ideology that humans are the cause not a mode of production that survives by constantly expanding and exhausting nature, putting entire habitats at risk, killing off cultures and destroying communities, must be challenged. If not, it really is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, as Fredric Jameson puts it.

The car, that symbol of freedom, that extension of the personality, that penis substitute, has a lot to answer for here. Over 650 million cars are estimated to be on the streets today. According to Iva

Illich, gridlocked traffic has meant that the average American travels at around 5 miles per hour putting in an average of 1,600 hours to travel 7,500 miles. As fossil fuels are pumped into the atmosphere to build, import, maintain, run and dispose of cars, wars are fought for access to the diminishing supplies of oil needed in factories and petrol stations. According to the International Energy Agency oil will 'peak' in about 2020, after which supplies will rapidly diminish. Roads carve up our cities, destroying natural and social habitats. The flaneur is stopped in his tracks, unable to wander the city without being constantly alert as to the flow of traffic and the recklessness of frustrated drivers impatient to get to their destination. The infrastructure of social life, from work through to leisure, communication, and consumption, is rationalised for car use. It is entirely *rational* then that people choose to drive cars given the practicalities of getting around cities where the infrastructure is designed for them. And, by the same token, it is entirely *irrational* that cities are structured and maintained for cars, especially in view of what we now know about the environmental consequences. The irrationality of the whole – the infrastructure – begets the rationality of the part: driving cars because it is practical to do so. When society is incapable of thinking beyond a world of concrete arteries, the environmental cost of maintaining the car industry becomes a factor when calculating the planetary resources needed to sustain a 'lifestyle' forced upon us. According to the World Wildlife Fund's 2010 *Living Planet Report*, 1.5 planets are needed to support current levels of consumption and absorb CO<sub>2</sub> waste. Assuming there is not a global depression in the meantime or, dare we imagine, a transformation of the mode of production, the figure is expected to rise to two planets by 2030.<sup>29</sup>

What about the gadgets we love so much and have become so dependent on? Even if we are not seduced into purchasing an iPad 2 less than a year after the iPad 1 was released, it is difficult to avoid updating perfectly serviceable electronic goods when they no longer meet a general industrial standard. We need faster processors, bigger flash memory and more advanced graphics chips to cope with all the information on which we now depend for our work. In 2007, the three-billionth cell phone was manufactured. Containing toxic materials such as lead and mercury, electronic goods make up 70% of toxic waste in US landfills.<sup>30</sup> But it is the human cost of consumption that most graphically illustrates the problem with an economic model whose health thrives on a constant turnaround of product. Coltan, for example, which is processed into a heat-resistant metal powder called tantalum, is used in mobile phones and computer chips. Quantities are found in the northeast region of the Congo where, according to the UN and human rights groups, many thousands of people have been massacred and displaced for access to the much sought-after commodity.<sup>31</sup>

In-built obsolescence and waste, supermarkets in New Zealand selling Kiwifruit from Italy, they are not the result of consumer demand *per se*; but of deregulated economies of scale that have come about because corporations (many of which are located in the west) need to expand in order to remain profitable. Everything begins with production and ends in consumption. As Marx said, 'a definite production determines a definite consumption, distribution and exchange as well as *definite relations between these different moments*.'<sup>32</sup> In order to be able to eat a cake we have to bake it first.

Global warming from this perspective is not a natural phenomenon, nor is it the result of individual greed. The consumer who buys a car to get to work, electronic devices to communicate, and food at prices they can afford is acting rationally (not necessarily unthinkingly) within a system that has become irrational to the point of threatening the natural environment upon which we depend. Even the capitalist who has to source the cheapest goods and labour to remain profitable is not generally in a position to be able to go 'carbon neutral'. The costs would be prohibitive and, considering the entire network of connections from extraction through to production, distribution, exchange, consumption and ultimately waste, practically impossible without massive state investment and regulation. Even



then we would need to account for the environmental cost of manufacturing sustainable technology on the required scale. With the narrative and predictions on global warming centring on human cause, Hollywood, with its penchant for dystopian and apocalyptic storylines, has written the script of our demise. It fits the scientific predictions on global warming to the scenario of the unchanging global order that we seem unable to think past, its spectacular sideshows are products of this conditioning. As with Hollywood's apocalyptic scripts, the means of producing global warming is privately owned by the solutions are foisted onto the individuated individual.

### **The Khan Hypothesis**

The only good environmentalist is a dead one and the greatest of all was the Mogul warrior Genghis Khan. As the *Daily Mail* reported, Khan killed so many people "that large areas of cultivated land grew thick once again with trees, which absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere... ecologists believe it may be the first ever case of successful manmade global cooling."<sup>33</sup> Misanthropy has become respectable. It becomes self-evident that, because humans have caused global warming, humanity itself is the problem. This simultaneously justifies the anti-humanist ideologies common among environmentalists who want to return to a more primitive state, and the neoliberals who believe humans to be motivated by self-interest alone – an ideology that claims empathy, compassion and self-sacrifice disguise ulterior motives. The solution then shifts onto the individual, and in a game of pass-the-parcel with death as the prize, the winner is Africa. The Khan Hypothesis that population control is the solution to global warming begins at the birthplace of humanity.

It took until the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century for the global population to reach its first billion. It took a little over a decade, until 2011, for the population to rise from 6 to 7 billion. But this is not the reason why carbon emissions have risen so fast. The environmental campaigner George Monbiot notes that between 1980 and 2005 the population of Sub-Saharan Africa increased by 18.5%, but carbon emissions in the region over the same period rose by just 2.4%. In the same timeframe, the population of North America increased by 4% while carbon emissions in the region rose by as much as 14%. It is reported that carbon emissions in China now exceed those of the United States; but what is not so widely acknowledged when discussing China in this context is that a significant amount of its productive output is geared to western demands. When we factor in the unequal levels of consumption in the West, and that mass consumption, waste and obsolescence are unavoidable symptoms of the economic model, it is plain that the issue is capitalism itself. Yet a Malthusian logic persists. Malthus's concern was not overpopulation as such, but rather that rising populations would eat into the rich man's cake. As John Bellamy Foster et al. explain, the population argument 'is all about making mass consumption and hence the ordinary consumer (not the wealthy few) the culprit.'<sup>34</sup>

Overpopulation.org and Population Action International are typical examples of pressure groups that link western consumerism with global warming while at the same time placing considerable emphasis on population control in developing countries. On their website, under the heading 'what works' the former lists a range of ideas all linked to birth control in developing countries: family planning, education for girls and women, and so forth. The latter 'demonstrates how demographic variables relate to climate change vulnerability, and expands the concept of climate change resilience by highlighting critical gender, fertility, and reproductive health dimensions'.<sup>35</sup> Responsibility for global warming is displaced onto the poor, destitute and disenfranchised, who become carriers of the disease for which the vaccine is western-style family planning. Here, the register shifts away from the species itself and onto a specific kind of species: the black African.

But it is true nonetheless that if the consumption levels enjoyed by the 'average' western consumer (with their car, computer and IKEA furniture) were also enjoyed by everyone else around

the world, the effect on the environment would likely be disastrous. In a question and answer session for the *Guardian* newspaper, the respected economic columnist Larry Elliot was asked whether consumerism as the solution to the economic crisis will eventually lead to ecological catastrophe. His typically measured answer was as follows:

Developing countries want the level of consumption we enjoy, people in the West have no greater desire to consume less, and there is no real mass political movement advocating the sort of changes that would help.<sup>36</sup>

He is right of course. Remembering that it is the whole that is irrational rather than the part, the obvious solutions are those least palatable in a free-market society: those, essentially, that structurally impact upon the free-flow of capital. Consider again the example of the motorcar. A meaningful solution for bringing down carbon emissions is for governments around the world to invest massively in public transport and infrastructure, and end the effective subsidy to the motorcar industry. Consumers would no longer need to be 'persuaded' to leave their gas-guzzling SUVs at home; driving around the city would be unnecessary and, as in pedestrian streets, impossible. Instead General Motors is bailed out to the tune of US \$50 billion, a positive intervention in many respects given the knock on effects on jobs in the material economy were the company to go under. Instead of re-orienting production, focus shifts to panaceas of technological environmentalism such as the carbon-free motorcar diverting the issue back onto the consumer. But as Jane Holtz Kay points out, the actual running of a car makes up a third of car-related carbon emissions. Another third is taken up in production and another third in its ultimate disposal.<sup>37</sup> Add the cost in building and maintaining roads as well as the broader infrastructure of privatised transportation, out of town supermarkets and so on, and the relative cost to the environment in actually running a car is even lower. By examining the whole cycle from production through to consumption, we realise that there are so many industries and processes involved in bringing the things we consume to market that anything we do individually, whether it be recycling tin cans or driving around in hybrid cars – is effectively useless, an argument supported by the fact that global carbon emissions continue to rise. We return to eco-consumption in chapter 4.0 Conscience.

It is psychologically and politically important that we distinguish human nature from naturalistic capitalism, to shift the signifier from Anthropocene to Capitocene thus specifying where in the world the problem lies and then take effective measures to deal with it. The next chapter treads a familiar path that critiques of consumption traverse, with examples of how the individuated individual is wrapped in the consumerist aesthetic.

## 3.0 Identification

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### **Variety has colonised the senses**

The Parisian arcades held such wonders for Benjamin; would he have found the extensive maze of streets and boulevards that now house all the delights of the world so enchanting? Would he see a charming little French café on Place St-Michel or only the Ben & Jerry's sign among the decade's flourishes? Variety is a brand that colonised the city in preparation for the tourist onslaught. We shop and we surf, we buy ready-made and tailor-made, consume as we please and now, if what is said about the Internet had any truth to it, produce as we please. Variety implies choice, choice agency and agency freedom. Pleasure effervesces along this plane; somewhere along the way we discover our identity and the alienation we feel is blunted. Choice is a paradox, argues Renata Salecl. The more choices we have, the greater our anxiety about what to buy. And choice is socially mediated. We never buy simply 'for ourselves' but always in degrees for others. We are guided by fashions, the tastes of significant others – our friends, workmates, family – the idea we have of ourselves, or rather the self we see reflecting back at us in the mirror. Why do we buy particular cars, phones or styles of clothes? Why do only certain clothes 'suit' us? Clothes probably say more about us than anything else we buy, which is why we are so careful when purchasing them. Even those who claim not to be 'fashion-conscious' want their choices confirmed before parting with their cash. It might be the assistant from whom they seek approval, or a lover; ultimately, though, it is the reflection in the changing room mirror that nods an okay. We invest in what Lacan called an Imaginary double: an idea about the self that suits our own self-perception. It is a fantasy of how we imagine, or would like to imagine, others see us. Whenever we place significance on a particular brand or style we imagine ourselves to be compatible with it. Louis Althusser linked the Imaginary to ideology; what he called interpellation is that moment when we mis/recognise ourselves as the subject of a hailing object or authority. Things 'hail us' and as they do we make a beeline towards them thus negotiating our way past the plethora of choices on display.

The usual narrative about consumerism is that things changed after the 1960s, when new technologies and organisational methods combined with a growing demand for individual autonomy and self-expression; a demand that business could now satisfy using more flexible production methods to produce a greater variety of goods and services. Zygmunt Bauman is typical of many commentators who saw this as a shift from what he describes as a 'heavy, solid and condensed' Fordist mass production employing large numbers of workers to a lighter, 'liquid', networked 'post-Fordist' small scale production employing far fewer workers. Not only did this give rise to a new form of organisation, it also (according to such arguments) gave rise to a new kind of subject; no longer a bureaucratic one-dimensional conformist, but instead an emotionally expressive, sophisticated and discerning individual. So from this perspective, the more 'totalising' views of those who claimed that homogeneity prevails and people have become one-dimensional are false. If anything, the thesis associated with the Frankfurt School of Critical Theorists, especially Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse, is more relevant than ever.

We might be immune to certain gimmicks of the culture industry, though not all of them. With more variety it is more likely that there will be objects that speak to even the most discerning and eccentric of characters. Commerce captures us in the little things from which we derive meaning almost as if the goods and services really were tailor-made to our whims and fancies. It is impossible to discern an identity that has not already been conceived in a book, advertising slogan, pop video

television series, blockbuster movie or YouTube clip. Every customer is king, a king of a culture that rings like tinnitus: the ring of pop jingoes wherever we go, the ring of the production line along which Manchester, Bristol and Leeds – retrofitted with Starbucks and Subways – tumble.

Choice has been sullied, individuality fetishised. This chapter is about a consumerist identity, the forced choices and false freedoms, an individuality becoming evanescent on the net of infinite varieties. Punching in a few words, sticking up a few photos, cobbling together sounds and images, fashioning one-dimensionality as a marker of agency. The socio-cultural examples given here are perhaps the more familiar ones we often associate with consumption, the individualistic excesses that appear, anything, as the negative manifestations of a society utterly beholden to commerce.

### 3.1 Enjoy Division

#### **That we enjoy ourselves is no marker of our freedom**

It is easy to identify moments of pleasure as a confirmation of our freedom to do as we please in a society that does indeed, at times, deliver the goods. If we are having a good time nothing seems forced. In the book *Fathers and Sons*, Ivan Turgenev wrote: ‘time (as we all know) sometimes flies like a bird and sometimes crawls like a snail; but man is happiest when he does not even notice whether time is passing quickly or slowly.’<sup>1</sup> Time is slow when being jostled at bars by men swilling their drinks over you: when screaming to friends in an attempt to make conversation as the swaggering DJ places discs on his player as if painting onto a canvas the 21<sup>st</sup> Century equivalent of Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger*. It is when time is neither fast nor slow, when we lose ourselves in the moment, that we are least cognisant of the world around us. When we enjoy ourselves there is no authority standing over us. When we consume we enjoy ‘free time’.

Today the superego – that infernal internalised authority making obscene demands - has censored the censor; the superego, as Lacan put it, permits us to enjoy, to do as we please, to do it without delay, and even to feel guilty for *not* having a good time. Marcuse called this liberation of desire repressive desublimation. Desublimation is another word for instant gratification, a gratification that is fleeting and superficial, a gratification with a price tag, making the satisfaction of desire ever more subject to wage labour – or cheap credit – as the only means of getting what we want; one of the reasons why desublimated pleasure is repressive under these conditions at least.

We cannot be forced to enjoy ourselves, but still enjoyment is, in many respects, forced. Those moments when only other people are having fun are times, perhaps, when we are more acutely aware of our alienation, more acutely aware of the rituals and codes of every day life which pressurise us to perform in certain ways. Anxiety gnaws the ego, causing us to reflect on whether there is something wrong with us if we are not enjoying ourselves too. In these moments we feel part of what David Riesman called the lonely crowd. Jean Baudrillard wrote:

It is no longer desire, nor even ‘taste’ nor a specific preference which are at issue, but a generalised curiosity driven by a diffuse obsession, a *fun morality*, whose imperative is enjoyment and the complete exploitation of all the possibilities of being thrilled, experiencing pleasure, and being gratified.<sup>2</sup>

The Fun at Work Company is typical of many online sources proselytising fun, here with advice on how to improve workplace collegiality:

A smile costs nothing and makes everybody’s [sic] day... but have some of us forgotten how? Our theatre director will teach your staff that ‘natural’ smile without the cheesy grin. These are fun workshops that everyone can enjoy.



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