

CULTURE OF CONSUMPTION

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Summary

In order to understand the development, contemporary situation and future possibilities for a Culture of Consumption, it is necessary to have both a global and a historical perspective. However, a Culture of Consumption is not an absolute concept. Therefore it is necessary to have a conceptual framework of analysis. In addition to marketing and instrumentalist theories promoting consumption, critical scholars use a variety of approaches to analyze a Culture of Consumption. Although there are many components to this concept, this essay will illustrate it through the five components of communications, advertising, brand, fashion and shopping.

1. Introduction

The notion of a Culture of Consumption, as the notion of economic thought itself, is very modern. In the early twenty-first century, we live in an era when nearly everyone takes some modicum of knowledge about the economy -- whatever their opinions of it -- for granted. Concepts such as consumerism, consumption and consumers also have become a major focus of much cultural debate including newspaper, political and

academic discourse. In fact, the contemporary situation of living in a Culture of Consumption though seemingly "natural" is actually quite recent and took much work and time to develop and deploy.

Inescapably, a Culture of Consumption must be analyzed in global terms. Gone are the days when those living in the United States could pretend that their economic and cultural world were somehow hermetically sealed. It is important to note that since its inception the U.S. economy depended on large infusions of immigrant labor as well as raw materials. Gone are also the days when those living in the Western industrial nations could imagine places that are pristine and disconnected from the modern industrial and post-industrial processes. One would be hard pressed to find a place where Coca Cola is not available, for example. Similarly, it would be difficult to find a place where messages encouraging some form of consumption are totally absent. Moreover, we can purchase all sorts of goods, ranging from clothing to foods from the furthest reaches of the globe. This recently accelerated process of globalization is often linked to the results and efforts of a Culture of Consumption.

Recent post-colonial literature and scholarship foreground the long historical interconnections between colonies and their colonizers, as well as previously existing lines of communications, transportation and trade among regional entities. All of these avenues of exchange involved human, material, symbolic and ideological interventions that helped to circulate and articulate a culture. Whereas colonial culture was differentially influential in different places, most scholars and critics would agree that currently there are very strong tendencies towards a global Culture of Consumption. While there is general agreement that there is differential ability to consume between and within global regions, the disagreement lies in terms of whether a global culture of consumption is seen as a positive, neutral or negative development and whether it is an inevitable historical stage or worthy of the immense political activism it would take to stem or stop it. Thus the study of a Culture of Consumption must be approached from a global level of analysis that is both historical and sensitive to local differences. (See *Media Globalization and Localization*.)

Recent political changes, such as the dissolution of the Soviet Union, have opened up entire geographic areas to the reach of consumption messages and therefore to participation in a Culture of Consumption. To name just a few products, pornographic media, fashion and popular music are being avidly consumed in the former Eastern Europe despite economic uncertainty and widespread unemployment. On a similar vein, international marketing campaigns involve most of the so-called Third World, with the possible exception of such places as Afghanistan where political turmoil is great. Thus not only Latin America but also Africa and Asia present those interested in expanding their markets with huge numbers of potential consumers and customers. Whereas the individual discretionary income in these geographic areas may be small, the aggregate spending power is great. In brief, from a marketer's perspective, nearly everyone is a potential customer though his or her purchasing power may differ.

2. Historical and Theoretical Approaches

Discussing economic, lifestyle and identity trends from a perspective of consumption can only be possible once certain ideas and concepts have entered into academic and vernacular discourse. Historical settings influence the theoretical approaches used to analyze consumption. Moreover, theoretical approaches largely determine the focus of study. The fact that we are talking about a Culture of Consumption also signals a shift in economic and historical research and attention from aggregate quantitative indicators and indices of production to those of consumption. Traditionally both of these were collected and gathered in macro and aggregate terms such as Gross National Product (GNP). There were no indices to refer to consumption *per se* although one could extrapolate from production indices. The focus on productive activity also meant that consumption was seen as less valuable, more wasteful.

Historians suggest that the early seeds of consumerism can be traced back to the late eighteenth century. While much of the literature focuses on England in particular and Europe in general, this may have more to do with the location of those writing than with the lack of consumerism elsewhere. Given that the nation state can be traced back to the Catholic Kings in Spain (circa 1490s), we can only surmise that some combination of circulation of goods and services, as well as their consumption, must have emerged earlier elsewhere in Europe, not to mention in developed civilizations beyond the "West". Nonetheless, both the emergence of the nation state and a burgeoning industry in need of increasing demand for its products generated a circulation of people, information and goods designed to increase consumption. Colonialist tendencies and economies of scale made this process inevitably global. At first, raw materials and labor were imported from the colonies, and later extra commodities were exported to the colonies. The development of national markets with the accompanying phenomena of mass media and advertising circulated goods, and information about goods, in a way and at a speed that were previously unimaginable. The national aspect of this eighteenth century development is, by the twenty-first century, a global reality.

The turn to collection of consumption data follows the ability of an economic system to produce without interruption and often exceed demand from any immediate markets. At this historical junction the focus shifts to consumption as the onus changes to getting people to consume what is being produced. Consumption indices collect aggregate data at the time of purchase. In a Culture of Consumption the latter become increasingly important, as the economic cycle is only complete once a product is consumed.

2.1. Neo-Marxist Approaches

It is not surprising that many critical consumption scholars base their work on Marx. After all, his classic *Capital* was a critique of capitalism and as such, indirectly, a critique of capitalist consumption. By the post World War II era of the Cold War, the industrial and ideological tensions between the Capitalist West and Socialist East were buttressed by theory and academic discourse as well as by popular press and entertainment vehicles. In his then highly influential *Stages of Growth: An anti-Communist Manifesto*, W. W. Rostow predicted that as industrialized societies grew and prospered beyond meeting basic needs and into an age of wealth and stability, the entire population would be able to engage in an age of "high mass consumption". Of course Karl Marx in his critique of capitalism had earlier foreseen such a stage, although from

a vastly different perspective. For Marx and Engels, production is driven by the need for profit. Marx theorized that the marketplace in capitalist societies would envelop an ever-increasing variety and quantity of goods and services in a process he termed "commodification" -- that is, when an increasing proportion of goods and services would be bought and sold in the marketplace as opposed to being freely or communally available, bartered or traded by those who were directly engaged in their production. Since workers did not own their labor or the fruits of their labor, they would have to purchase commodities, including those they helped produce, in the marketplace. Marx also introduced the concept of fetishism to explain the process whereby things would be treated and traded as if they were alive, and people through their labor would be sold and bought as inanimate production components in the marketplace. Ideology and culture are hypothesized to be directly related to, and indeed an effect of, the means of production. In crude terms, those who own capital also provide the ruling ideas of an epoch. As such consumption is also seen as an effect of production.

Critical approaches to the Culture of Consumption directly or indirectly draw on a Marxist analysis of capitalism. The original tension stems from Marx's binary division between base and superstructure. In terms of cultural analysis the base has generally been interpreted as the location of material production and the superstructure as the area of ideas and ideology and therefore the site of culture. Much of the theoretical tension and development within approaches to consumption have explored this divide. Political economists document the ownership and control of material resources and extrapolate how that might influence content and ideology. A tradition dating to Dallas Smythe (see *Advertising*) and very forcefully articulated by scholars and public intellectuals such as Herbert I. Schiller and Robert McChesney has documented the shrinking number of corporate owners of an ever increasing amount and variety of cultural and other types of property. This research strongly suggests that increased conglomeration of capital results in a reduced democratic space. For example, if a company such as General Electric owns entertainment or news media, they very likely might try to suppress critical content about their corporation's other activities, or might not allow authors or artistic creators with known critical stances to publish or disseminate their work through media vehicles owned by General Electric.

Another group of scholars has been trying to theorize the superstructure or cultural aspect of capitalism and whether that necessarily can be traced back to the base or material production and ownership. For example, Adorno and Horkheimer applied these terms to the area of culture and thus introduced into theoretical discussion the concept of "cultural industries". By combining the previously mutually exclusive terms, within Marxist thought, of "culture" and "industry" they foregrounded the connections between these two spheres. They suggested that cultural products such as music, literature and all forms of popular entertainment were being produced, distributed and marketed akin to products such as cars and flour. Industrial imperatives of mass production to stimulate mass consumption applied to music and cars. Though Adorno and Horkheimer attempted to develop the concept of culture, they still saw mass media, as a business presented as ideology, as promoting people to fulfill false needs that went against their real interests. (See *Mass Communication and Society*.)

Althusser (1971), though not necessarily writing about advertising or consumption, provided yet another version of a Marxist critique. In an attempt to theorize why individuals take up particular positions, he proposed interpellation as a process whereby we identify with a particular ideological position. He suggested that individuals were "hailed" by ideological cultural messages embodying institutional corporate and state forces. As Stuart Hall elaborated, hailing as a process is complex in that it involves hailing, as in hailing a policeman to come over, and being hailed, as in being addressed by the policeman. In this framework the symbolic system takes a role as a component in the construction of identities, potentially as independent of the economic realm, and the construction of subjectivity is elaborated as a complex and dynamic process. However, a strong and important remnant from classic Marxist thought is the implication that individuals are subject to a false or misleading ideology.

The theoretical frameworks outlined by Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci can be applied to the analysis of consumption in contemporary societies. Both of these scholars foregrounded ideology as a crucial component in the maintenance of a capitalist system with uneven distribution of wealth and power. Those drawing on the work of Gramsci can point to our continued and increased consumption as yet another way in which we contribute not just to the strengthening of the capitalist system but also to our own exploitation. By using our hard-earned income, the result of the sale of labor power to capitalists, we consume commodified goods and services. The profit from the sale of these goods and services further enriches the coffers of capitalist owners. Those drawing on the work of Louis Althusser can include consumption messages such as advertising as components of an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). An Althusserian scholar can study how a particular advertisement "hails" or persuades a consumer to listen and to buy through an ideologically persuasive appeal. In both cases consumer messages are seen as powerful ideological tools that subvert our ability to work in our own interest.

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Biographical Sketch

Angharad N. Valdivia is research associate professor at the Institute of Communications Research, University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. Her books include *Geographies of Latinidad: Latina/o Studies into the Twentieth Century* (Duke), *Media Studies Companion* (Blackwell), *A Latina in the Land of Hollywood* (Arizona), and *Feminism, Multiculturalism and the Media* (Sage). Her research focuses on issues of gender, multiculturalism and popular culture especially as they pertain to Latin American and US Latina/o Studies.