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Karl Marx's critique of capitalism included a provocative discussion of the nature of commodities, but did not address the problems of consumer behavior and motivation. This essay summarizes Marx's view of commodities in a capitalist economy, and reviews the work of more recent authors who have applied a Marxian analysis to modern consumerism.

MARX'S ANALYSIS OF THE COMMODITY

The uniqueness of human nature, in Marx's view, is that we are not chained solely to basic physiological needs, but are capable of adapting the resources of nature far in excess of our needs. Implicit in this formulation is the concept of culture as based in material production. People express and realize themselves through production, both through what they produce, and how they produce it. The activity of labor is the process of realizing human consciousness. That is to say, human consciousness is objectified in the material products of labor.

In capitalism the objectification that is inherent in material production occurs under estranged social conditions. Workers do not retain control of the potential that is embodied in their labor, the potential which Marx termed "labor power." Instead labor power has become a commodity to be bought and sold. The workers now see neither the fruits of their labor nor any reason to work other than to obtain wages.

In precapitalist social systems, production was essentially the production of use values for consumption. However, with the advent of markets and private property, the unity between production and consumption breaks down. Through the dominance of exchange value the producer is separated from the product of labor. The product now confronts the producer as an unrecognizable form in the alien sphere of consumption. This experience of estrangement and alienation was the hallmark of capitalist societies for Marx.

The commodity is the form that material products take in capitalist societies. Commodities possess both use value (the capacity to satisfy some human want) and exchange value (the capacity to be exchanged for other commodities). Use value is a qualitative relationship between objects and human needs, while exchange value is a quantitative relationship between commodities. Marx was concerned with rebutting the notion, fundamental to neoclassic economics, that prices derived from the working of supply and demand based simply on use value. For Marx, exchange value bore no intrinsic relation to use value, but was simply a measure of the amount of labor necessary to produce the commodity. If two commodities have

the same price and may be exchanged for each other, they need not be equally useful, but they must embody the same amount of labor.

Marx's theory of value seems to present a paradox. If all commodities are exchanged for equivalent values, how is it possible for surplus value, or profits, to arise in production? The resolution of the paradox lies in the unique nature of labor power as a commodity which can generate more than its own cost of reproduction. Workers must be paid wages sufficient to reproduce their daily life – that is, social or physical subsistence – but labor, unlike other commodities, can yield an increased value when applied in production. Machines alone cannot produce; labor alone can. The product of labor beyond the amount necessary for the workers' subsistence can be appropriated by capitalists, based on their control of the conditions of employment. Any social system generates a surplus beyond what is needed for the reproduction of the lives of the workers; under capitalism that surplus is appropriated as private profit.

How is it that this appropriation of surplus value goes unrecognized by those who are exploited? For Marx, the answer lies in the concept of fetishism, by which he means the way in which social relations appear to be impersonal natural forces. This finds its clearest manifestation in the fetishism of commodities. The exchange values of commodities conceal their basis in labor and appear to be natural facts.

> It is nothing but the definite social relations between men which assumes here for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things ... I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labor as soon as they are produced as commodities.[1]

MODERN MARXIST PERSPECTIVES ON CONSUMERISM

Writing in the nineteenth century, Marx did not anticipate the consumer society of the twentieth century. Yet a number of more recent writers have drawn inspiration from and extended the Marxian analysis to describe contemporary consumerism.

The starting point for the modern Marxian analysis is the recognition that commodities are presented to us solely in terms of exchange values, with their origins in production obscured. They therefore appear to be objects without any overt social meaning. The function of institutions such as advertising is to define those meanings, a function that Sut Jhally has referred to as the theft and reappropriation of meaning: "The function of advertising is to refill the empty commodity with meaning ... Advertising would make no sense if objects already had an established meaning."[2]

Not only advertising, but a whole host of cultural activities and industries can be interpreted as attempts to construct an economy of symbolic or cultural goods that supports the successful reproduction of capitalism. This perspective is taken to an extreme by Herbert Marcuse, in One Dimensional Man. For Marcuse, affluence is far from liberating. Working class acceptance of the modes of relaxation, enjoyment, and consumption prescribed by advertising is proof of capitalism's pervasive social control. Rather than the products of labor being a healthy extension of the self, people themselves are now mere extensions of the products they consume. As people

come to recognize themselves in their commodities, the mechanism which ties individuals to society changes, and social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced.

Marcuse's work highlights an issue that is central for other critics as well, namely the loss of the idea that goods embody any real use values. In becoming pure exchange values, the cultural meanings of goods have become malleable, and are based upon little other than non-material desires and ideological fantasies. John Berger identifies advertising's imagery and language of sexuality, power, guilt, envy, and glamour as fantasies unrelated to the reality of goods and their consumption. Raymond Williams provides an ironic reversal of the common cliché that modern society is too materialistic. "If we were sensibly materialist ... we should find most advertising to be of insane irrelevance. Beer would be enough for us, without the additional promise that in drinking it we show ourselves to be manly, young at heart, or neighborly."[3]

The triumph of symbolic and cultural meanings supplied by advertising over the use values of goods is explored by W. F. Haug. He emphasizes that desire and fantasy are founded upon the artful appearance of the modern commodity. Beautiful packaging and exterior surfaces are designed to accelerate the rate of sales. The ideal of commodity aesthetics for Haug is to deliver a minimum of use value disguised by a maximum of seductive illusion.[4]

Haug and others assume that behind the cultural and symbolic meanings that goods have acquired lies a natural and unequivocal relationship between needs and use values. This relationship is questioned by the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard, who argues that both needs and use values are historically specific and are inevitably socially determined.[5]

In orthodox Marxism, needs and use values exist separate from or prior to class society, and provide the foundation upon which a utopian system of production could someday be established. For Baudrillard, in contrast, the whole network of social relations of modern capitalist society is inscribed within the realm of consumption. Use, utility and need are culturally determined and cannot exist independent of society. The fetishism created by alienated social relations is thus able to affect use value as well as exchange value.

Baudrillard's analysis highlights the manner in which commodities serve as culturally defined symbols. Even as utilitarian an object as a washing machine may acquire connotations of comfort and prestige as well as providing laundry services. For Baudrillard the logic of sign values represents the final triumph of capitalism, imposing a cultural order compatible with large-scale commodity production. But in the end, by reducing use-value and need to mere functions of the manipulation of sign values, Baudrillard, like those who he criticizes, provides only a narrow perspective on a multi-faceted subject.

Notes

1. Karl Marx, quoted by Lee, 14.
2. Sut Jhally, quoted in Lee, 17
3. Raymond Williams, quoted in Lee, 20.
4. W.F. Haug
5. Jean Baudrillard