

Consumerism and Postmodernity: Convergence and Cross-fertilization

Ankita Sharma

PhD. Student, Department of Philosophy, Punjabi University Patiala, India

Abstract: *The most salient characteristic of post-modernism is the absence of meta-narratives such as truth, reason, morality, tradition, and history, inter alia. There is no absolute, as everything is floating in relativity or a condition which is filled with simulations and simulacra. Humans in this era are inveigled by the triumph of the market economy. The emergence of consumer culture has fuelled the fire of postmodernity. The postmodern era is dominated by consumers' lifestyles and mass consumption and the focal point of this culture is the production of commodities just to satisfy the taste and the greed of consumers. Though consumerism has existed for ages, it hit its crescendo after the industrial and technological revolutions. Presently consumerism works through advertisement and marketing, with the purpose to provide information about the availability of a product in the market and to create a deep desire and henceforth a psychological dependence and need in consumers for that product, which was unprecedented in the past. Consumerism comprised and encompassed the basic needs; of food, fashion and shelter industries initially; however, in the present times it has ventured into many profitable and luxurious enterprises that cater to human wants. Regarding this, there is no exaggeration to say that consumerism is the spirit of our modern life.*

The present paper emphasises the sociological, political, and economic aspects of consumerism; that the social dimension of consumerism is important because other-dependent consciousness ultimately results in man's loss of natural liberty. The economic dimension is important to understand the replacement of virtues and ethical norms and values, by the industry of materialism. Political consumerism also merits attention because at stake are values such as environmentalism, labour rights, human rights, and sustainable development.

Keywords: *Postmodernism, consumerism, Karl Marx, meta-narratives*

1. Introduction

The word 'Postmodernism' was first used in the 1930s, to indicate a reaction to modernism. The central features associated with postmodernism include, the erasing of the boundary between art and everyday life; the collapse of the hierarchal distinction between high and mass/popular culture; stylistic promiscuity favouring eclecticism and the mixing of codes; parody, pastiche, irony, playfulness and the celebration of the surface 'depthlessness' of culture; the decline of the originality/genius of the artistic producer; and the assumption that art can only be a repetition.¹

Postmodernism and Consumerism run parallel to each other. As the former is linked with the loss of real art and parody the latter, in the words of Jean Baudrillard leads to a sense of loss, as there is no real identity and no way of gaining fulfilment in the continuous production and consumption of things. In our postmodern society, few things play an influential role in our lives as consumerism does. Consumer society results ultimately in consumer culture, and consumer culture is not filled with the traditional

¹ - M. Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Post-Modernism*, 2007, Sage publication, p. 7.

values of simple living but is occupied with capitalist-created values, which stimulated humans to choose endless consumption as the way of their living. According to Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen, consumer culture can be summarized in the three phrases: ‘Today there is no fashion: there are only fashions.’ ‘No rules, only choices.’ ‘Everyone can be anyone’.² In such a society, humans are not only consuming the goods but also human services and therefore, human relationships (Baudrillard, 1998).

The multiplied production of goods and services after the industrial revolution has successfully created a society of consumers in almost all parts of the world, which can be rightly entitled as new ‘Systematic colonialization’ (Marx, 1867). The consumption of food and clothing is intensifying with time. Today, consumption is not limited to the human lifestyle, but has widely entered and has been impacting since long man’s social, political and economic aspects of life, which raises a matter of concern for man’s freedom to live as a free and rational being. This paper will discuss the abovementioned concerns (Social, economic, political) in a more nuanced way.

2. Social Dimension of Consumerism

In the words of Jean Baudrillard, all around us today, we have a fantastic conspicuousness of consumption and abundance, that consists of multiple objects, services, and material goods, and this represents something of a fundamental mutation in the ecology of the human species.³ It would not be wrong to say that the present age is the age of affluence, and humans of this age are surrounded by objects rather than people. From basic needs of food, clothing and shelter we are walking on the path of endless desires. Food nowadays is not consumed with the purpose of serving its nutritious value but as a source of entertainment and revenue. Food chains across the globe like MacDonald’s, KFCs, Burger King, Domino’s, and Starbucks, have hired Artificial intelligence and other technology to understand human behaviour and invest millions in creating advertisements to make food appear attractive and desirable.

The same is true for clothes as well. The branding rivalry in the apparel industry is very intense and is fast growing. The consumer mindset becomes the target of investors and they spend millions on building a brand accordingly. The focus is not only on quality but on being distinct. Our social setup is divided into classes of rich and poor. The rich classes want to look unique and therefore this mindset serves as a perfect pitch for player brands like Gucci, Prada, and Dolce &Gabbana who present their products, by dressing up models to look like Goddesses’. They cater exclusively to the rich but have created a brand culture using media technology such that the middle classes are also influenced to practice the same way of life. The rising industry ensures that there is no dearth of products in the market. Therefore, the brand race is creating a hierarchy, if not to say injustice, among the social structure.

The growth of an individual is influenced massively by the social system. Globalization combined with access to information has resulted in influencing human lifestyles. Free markets and access to global products have raised materialistic aspirations. Big businesses create advertisements that work like drugs that create an adrenaline rush and a dominant desire. In a consumer society, happiness is about accumulating wealth and consuming commodities. The demonstration effect created by advertisements and media has raised standards as far as human wants are concerned.

The question here is why are we concerned with such a kind of culture? What is wrong with following the trends and living with affluence? The answer is that the man in a consumer society is chasing material comforts with animosity. Though he seeks happiness in ownership, he, unfortunately, ends up miserable as the race is endless. He ends up comparing himself to his peers and the society around him and lives in the constant fear of being left behind in the race. The obsession to look good and rich leads to selfishness, jealousy, and negativity and eventually leads to insecure relationships. He feels owning luxury and comforts will uplift his value in society and yet the reality is that he is ending up more egoistic and lonely. He fails to recognise his own self-worth and is dependent on others to see his own

² - Stuart and E. Ewen, *Channels of Desires*, 1998, University of Minnesota Press, p. 15.

³ -J. Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society Myths and Structure*, 1998, Sage Publication, p.25

worth. Consumerism has become a golden cage and man finds himself unable to escape it. The individual has become for himself what Jean Jacques Rousseau holds to be an artificial creation out of the opinion of others (Charvet, 1974). In the words of Rousseau, this is other-dependent consciousness, which makes it necessary for man to please others for their own satisfaction, resulting in the loss of man's natural liberty. Rousseau identifies that the root of the social problem is this other dependent consciousness. The problem that Rousseau identified several centuries before the consumer society was created, is traceable in our modern life as well. Rousseau lays emphasis on the requirement of a new consciousness, which will enable men to conceive themselves in their relations with others in such a way that no one is dependent but all remain unrestricted and free.⁴

3. Economical Dimension of Consumerism

As Galbraith ascertains, "like other social sciences, economics does not restrict itself to a simple and coherent pattern. On the contrary, it seems to be incoherent, inchoate, and intellectually frustrating". (Galbraith, 1958, p. 17)⁵. One needs to have the right understanding of economic behaviour in mind. Man can never remain unaware of anything that is happening around him. Within his substantial range, man is permitted to believe what pleases him. Toynbee states that the demand for consumer goods originated from three factors, including our needs, our wants, and our 'bogus wants'⁶. The bogus things are responsible for our consumerist approach in the world, and this approach is made and shaped by the advent of the industrial revolution a few centuries ago. It has triggered off the unnecessary needs for humans, whether related to food, clothing, fashion, housing or any other things that we can think of.

The major role of advertisements is undeniable because it facilitates transferring unnecessary information to the customer and makes them aware of the newest form of products and goods available in the market. Needless to remind that markets run exclusively on advertisements and commercial hype. There are numerous examples of commercials that impact customers to go beyond their means and buy the products. A nexus is created between the capitalists and the governments. An example of this is the mortgage and loan companies that team up with big housing brands, car companies, and educational institutes that allure customers and exploit their dreams to own a house or a car and even a degree from elite institutes. Most people around the world end up with huge debts and struggle with the economic crisis, the complex web of which they are unable to escape.

The purpose of bringing such an example of the reality of the advertising world is to show how these industries create the need for their products in the mind of the customers. It would not be wrong to say that, all over the world, we are exposed to a Pandora box of selling tricks, some old - albeit skilfully adapted to modern circumstances - and others new, however, been carefully devised to outsmart the law (Warren, Magnuson, & Carper, 1968).

Other than Advertisements, sales pitches also help the companies to expand. While advertisements focus on the masses, sales pitches target individuals in person. We are familiar with various sales pitches such as "This lovely x-cubic-foot freezer is yours absolutely free if you subscribe to our food-freezer plan" and "Congratulations! You have just won the second prize in our drawing for a vacuum cleaner, which entitles you to 150 dollars off the purchase price", among others (Warre, Magnuson, & Carper, 1968, pp. 22,24). Pertinent to this is the policy of these companies to hire young men and instruct them with cynicism and contemptuousness, and that is why many critics never miss the opportunity to argue for the comparability of industrialism and a masculine and even patrimonial order.

4. Political Dimension of Consumerism

A human being is political by nature as believed by the great philosopher Aristotle. As the social nature of man creates his other-dependent consciousness, the political nature makes him a power-

⁴ -J. Charvet, *The Social Problem in The Philosophy of Rousseau*, 1974, Cambridge University Press, p.2

⁵ -J. k. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 1958, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston

⁶ - A. J. Toynbee, *America and the world Revolution*, 1962, Oxford University Press, London

conscious being. The government is the authoritative body in any state. For the economic growth of a country, the government needs the support of the capitalists and sometimes this relationship between capitalists and government creates problems for the citizens and for the natural environment.

The colonial system of Britain is the biggest example in the history of the existence of the profound relationship between state authority and capitalists. By creating a global market, colonialization persuaded people to use commodities which are produced in different parts of the world. Backed by the industrial revolution, these markets expanded worldwide and gave a way forward for the setting up of consumer society in the hands of capitalists and governments.

German philosopher and humanist, Karl Marx, has elucidated these developments as such: “At present, all the wealth of society goes into the possession of the capitalist, even after he pays the landowner his rent, the labourer his wages, the tax and tithe gatherer their claims, he keeps a large, indeed the largest, and a continually augmenting share, of the annual produce of labour for himself. The capitalist may now be said to be the first owner of all the wealth of the community”⁷

Therefore, with the help of political systems, capitalists established their markets in the name of the country’s development and progress. However, with the waste of their countries’ land, labour force, water as well as other natural resources, they stepped into a process which is described by Karl Marx as: ‘they exploited many labourers, and this expropriation is accomplished by the action of the immanent laws of capitalistic production itself, by the centralization of capital’.⁸ In such a game, the worker suffers from misery, oppression and exploitation, while the customer is seduced by the abundance of the products available in the market.

Another aspect of the modern government’s involvement in mass consumerism, which inevitably results in destroying nature and damaging the environment, is the obsession with mega buildings and construction. Some of the major unserviceable projects in the world are the result of such obsessions. One can bring examples such as the newly built capital city of Myanmar Nay Pyi Daw, the Yucca Mountain Nuclear Waste Repository in the U.S.A, the Forest City in Malaysia, China’s abandoned Ghost city, and the Mallata Rajapaksa International Airport in Sri Lanka⁹, the last one is a total politically-oriented project, which did not bring back the expenses which were spent on.

Environmental degradation is expanding daily due to harmful activities to Nature, particularly soil and rainforests. Brazil’s controversial stadium, ‘Arena da Amazonia’ located in Manaus, at the heart of Amazon rainforests is a good example in this regard. There is no part of the earth which remained untouched, as air, land, water, and even space are damaged hugely.¹⁰ So ultimately the people will suffer and governments prefer to pretend a deaf game. Because the benefits of these companies which are governments’ allies are always higher than the consent of the people.

5. Conclusion

We have learned many lessons from our analyses of the effects of consumerism on people’s lives. As social and political animals, human beings cannot live isolated and secluded from others, however, this co-dependence on each other, which was once considered necessary for his survival, has found new dimensions. The other-dependent consciousness, choosing wealth over virtue, and power-consciousness being, *inter alia*, are in part responsible for man’s new hectic and stressed way of living. Mass production is not only affecting human life but also damaging the natural resources of the earth,

⁷ -K. Marx, *The Capitalist*, volume 1, 1867, Progress Publishers, Moscow, p.476

⁸ - Watch CBC News documentary *Made in Bangladesh-the fifth estate* at https://youtube.be/onD5UOP5z_c, 11 October 2013

⁹ -Watch the video on the Most Useless Projects in the World, under Top Luxury Channel at <https://youtube.be/on2yz8SN3fg>, 14 November 2021.

¹⁰ -As of May 2021, more than 27,000 pieces of orbital debris, or “space junk” are tracked by the Department of Defence’s global Space Surveillance Network (SSN) sensors. The rising population of space debris increases the potential danger to all space vehicles, including the International Space Station and other spacecrafts with humans aboard, such as SpaceX’s Crew Dragon (www.nasa.gov).

and that is why we need to take a pause from this fast-paced hasty life of commercialism and the never-ending process of production, to rethink what the meaning of being human really is, and how a man should connect to his fellow human as well as to the environment. These questions are relevant to authenticity and the necessity of having an authentic life.

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