

THE CONSUMER SOCIETY

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Summary

In every form of social organization culture has a strong influence on exchanges among individuals and between them and the environment. In every society the symbolic structures expressed in cultural forms define ideas of utility, and of value. They organize the choice and the manipulation of natural materials in order to produce particular objects, particular goods. What is peculiar to Western culture is the fact that economy has become the most important site of symbolic production: hidden under the abstract equivalence of objects—their exchange value, that finds its expression in the universal means of exchange (money)—there is the fact that needs, desires and objects of desire (i.e. commodities) are organized according to cultural determinations.

Nowadays commodities have become the main channel through which to communicate to other people information about values, status, etc. They are signs through which we can assess the standing of people in society, the individuals' reference groups, their values and beliefs.

There is much debate about the characteristics of consumer societies which can be summarized as follows: rising affluence; more time available for leisure pursuit; people build their identity from their activities as consumers and from leisure time as much as from work; there is more interest in the presentation of an image and the construction of

lifestyle; consumption activity has become the main communicative channel through which one makes visible not only social status but values, beliefs, membership of group, subculture, etc.; consumption is organized not around need, but around daydreams.

1. Introduction

In every form of social organization culture has a strong influence on the exchanges among individuals and between them and the environment. In every society the symbolic structures expressed in cultural forms define ideas of utility, of value. They organize the choice and the manipulation of natural materials in order to produce particular objects, particular goods.

What is peculiar to Western culture is the fact that economy has become the most important site of symbolic production: hidden under the abstract equivalence of objects—their exchange value, that finds its expression in the universal means of exchange (money)—there is the fact that needs, desires and objects of desire (i.e. commodities) are organized according to cultural determinations. In societies organized according to different criteria—I am referring here to the so-called 'primitive societies'—the main *locus* of symbolic production and differentiation is not to be found in the economy but in other social relations, mainly kinship, and the other spheres of activity are dependent upon and ordered by kinship status.

In the modern market economy exchanges have mainly an acquisitive purpose. Conspicuous waste still has the meaning of maintaining and showing the person's position in the social hierarchy, his power of expenditure, but it no longer has the aim of destroying somebody else's wealth and degrading his position in the social structure of power and status when he is not able to reciprocate, to fulfil the obligation, to return the gift, or the destruction and wastage of goods, as in the potlatch of certain North American Indians. Nowadays unproductive expenditure in such a wide and conspicuous form as that characterizing the socio-economic structure of previous social organizations is no longer present. This does not mean that this form of spending has completely disappeared: it is still present although in a more limited and reduced form. In modern society it is no longer possible to find the orgiastic, the extremely generous and incommensurable aspect that characterizes competition for power and wealth. Notwithstanding this fact, we have to recognize that the principles of loss and of sacrifice are still present when we analyze the way in which individuals compete for status and prestige.

The difference between the contemporary manifestation of the phenomenon and previous ones lies in the fact that the forms that this competition takes nowadays are far more discrete, private and limited than those we find in situations like potlatch are, medieval feasts, or the court lifestyle during the absolutist period. There is no longer *destruction* of wealth, there is no longer wastage (in the sense of the examples just listed) but *acquisition* of luxury goods that have the purpose of showing off our unnecessary expenditure capacity. Social standing is still connected—although not in the same way it used to be—with the fact that wealth must be partially sacrificed to unproductive social expenditure like entertainment, sports, etc., but social obligation towards expenditures for reasons of prestige is far less strong and compelling than it was in previous times.

The shift in the ways of competing for social standing, in the extent to which the individual sacrifices part or all of his wealth to this purpose, has paralleled the shift in the meaning of property, of possession. Indeed it can be argued that in a social environment characterized by conspicuous destruction of wealth and by a high level of sacrifice—as, for example, the societies in which rituals of destruction such as potlatch were present—the emphasis must have been on the ability to accumulate in order to destroy, in order to give away, without any relation to productive investments, or accumulation for accumulation's sake. Greed must have been disassociated from the idea of preserving, of keeping. The idea of saving and devoting the bulk of personal income to productive investments and only a small part of it to luxury and unproductive expenditures is quite recent, and is connected with the beliefs and values of the ascending and ascetic bourgeoisie.

2. Consumption as a communicative system

What makes the relationship between individual and objects in contemporary society a peculiar one is the fact that objects nowadays have become the main channel through which to communicate to other people information about values, status, etc. They are signs through which we can assess the standing of people in society, the individuals' reference groups, their values and beliefs. As has been argued, in every form of society objects perform the function of making apparent the social differences among persons, and conspicuous consumption and waste often play an important role in confirming and legitimizing the social order, the structure of power. Wasteful expenditure has been a traditional way in which the aristocrats affirmed their predominance. If therefore it is possible to argue that objects have always had a symbolic value, it is also necessary to stress that in previous societies this quality was related to other elements such as ceremonials, lineage system, etc.

A particular feature of modern society is the fact that all these previous elements and systems have progressively disappeared and therefore objects, their ownership and conspicuous use, become the most important system of signs through which we are able to signal our and decipher other people's social position, and determine our and self perception. Through things we distinguish ourselves from others, and since rigid criteria of class and estate differentiation no longer exist, it is mainly through objects that we build a universal system of signs by which we analyze and understand the world.

It is a universal system because—at least formally—everybody can own and use all the objects he wants, but, at the same time, this universalization carries as a consequence an oversimplification and reduction, since the individual is more and more defined only by his objects. This phenomenon induces the person to an endless process of differentiation from others through his belongings. It could be said that this universal system promotes anxious competition over material possessions.

In this framework, consumption activity becomes a way in which we relate not only to objects but also to other people, to the world, and therefore it must be studied and analyzed as an important and fundamental aspect of our society and not as a particular and limited sphere, as a well defined activity. What really makes unique the meaning of objects in our society is the fact that they become signs and in this way their functional utility, their use-value, tends to be less and less significant while they obtain their

meaning from being consistent with the abstract system of signs in which they confront themselves with other objects. As Baudrillard in his book on consumption society says, at this point the object is consumed not in its materiality but in its differentiation. If one accepts this interpretation it follows that our relation to objects, which have value for their quality as signs, is a relation quite different from that we have to objects which have value as concrete products. The logic according to which we buy and consume objects is that of the manipulation of signs, not that of need and satisfaction. It is in this perspective that we can speak of an endless process of consumption since there are no limits to this competition through signs.

People have always owned, wasted, exchanged in any kind of society, and objects have always had a symbolic value; in this way they have enforced and legitimized the authority of the leaders, of the sorcerers. What has changed in modern society is the fact that things no longer display the authority and the power of the person to whom they belong, by whom they are wasted; they just classify and establish the hierarchical structure of purchasing power. Today everybody can buy any object he likes as long as he can afford to buy it, things therefore assume the character of goods and money becomes the common denominator through which one values power and status.

Moreover, objects have been gradually losing the character of sacred things that in previous societies was connected with all objects that symbolized power (religious, magical, political) and authority. That sacredness made people experience their social ties more strongly. Nowadays this sacredness is less and less present. We can still perceive its presence, but in a faint and vague form, in rare and extraordinary situations. Shils and Young in the essay on 'The meaning of Coronation' give us an example of it describing the coronation of Elizabeth II, like any other great occasion which in some manner touches the sense of the sacred, brought vitality in family relationships. The coronation, much like Christmas, was a time for drawing closer the bond of the family, for reasserting its solidarity, and for re-emphasising the values of the family—generosity, loyalty, love—which are at the same time the fundamental values necessary for the wellbeing of the larger society.

Rituals and sacredness are more and more marginal in our society. The significance of objects from this perspective is decreasing. Things are less and less able to make visible the ties that are at the basis of the social system. Thus, notwithstanding, we can still speak of a sacred meaning of objects when we refer to the special ties that we have with certain objects which embody memoirs or are presents received in particular occasions, prizes won in sport competitions or similar occasions, or when we think of the exchange of gifts that, just because they are gifts, put themselves outside the territory and the logic of economic exchange, of exchange of equivalents. The fact is that nowadays these are exceptions, while the "normal" relation between individuals and things tends to be more and more a relationship based on the objects' property of classifying the hierarchical structure, of emphasizing values and standing. This is what characterizes our society as a society of consumption. From this perspective it seems interesting and useful to our purpose to understand how the phenomenon of consumption has been studied and explained. Through the analysis of this literature we can in fact grasp a better understanding of the motivations, reasons and needs which induce contemporary individuals to surround themselves with objects, to satisfy any kind of need through the

practice of consuming.

3. Consumption goods and needs satisfaction

The analyses social scientists have produced on consumption reflect the characteristics this phenomenon takes on in contemporary society. There are several different approaches to the problem of consumption, each contributing in some way to a better understanding of the question ‘why do people buy?’. A question that is of essential importance if we are to answer the more general problem of the meaning of objects in everyday life. By analysing the literature on consumption it is possible to point out several different approaches. I do not intend to review the literature on this subject but only to summarily analyze some contributions which shed light on problems related to consumption.

3.1. The utilitarian approach

The traditional economic model—grounded in utilitarian theory—is based on the presupposition that the individual buys and consumes according to his convenience. Implicit in this idea is the concept that human beings have needs and their aim is the satisfaction of them; consumption is equivalent to the process of needs satisfaction. Since human beings are never satisfied, this process of consumption is endless. As Katona says, accomplishment tends to raise levels of aspiration. Having achieved what we want, we often raise our sights. It is not the gratification of needs but their failure and frustration which make us announce further goals and ambitions.

Goods—in this theoretical framework—become far less relevant to the owners as soon as they are bought; since in this way the desires are satisfied and the attractiveness of the objects diminishes. The aim of human action is the search for welfare, for happiness, which is the satisfaction of needs. The individual works, produces, in order to be able to consume. The satisfaction is only in consumption not in work; production therefore is dependent on and subordinated to consumption.

The fact that consumption is identified with needs satisfaction, implies a restrictive conception of needs since they—in this theoretical perspective—find expression only in the form of goods, of commodities, whereas they manifest themselves in a process of indefinite development of which consumption is only an aspect. There is no definition nor discussion of what needs are and of what satisfaction means. Goods are considered products for the satisfaction of needs, for consumption. There is no attempt to verify whether they perform different roles besides that of satisfaction of individual and personal exigencies, nor an attempt to analyze these concepts. There is no attempt to analyze and decipher needs, their complexity, the way in which they manifest themselves, the different modalities of satisfaction.

As Hirsch points out, satisfaction is derived from relative position alone, from being in front, or from others being behind. Command over particular groups and facilities in particular times and conditions becomes an indicator of such precedence in its emergence as a status symbol. Where the sole or main source of satisfaction derives from the symbol rather than the substance, this can be regarded as pure social scarcity.

Such satisfaction may also be associated with absolute physical scarcities. Thus to at least same people, part of the attraction of a Rembrandt, or of a particular landscape is derived from its being the only one of its kind; as a result, physically scarce items such as these become the repository of pure social scarcity also.

To limit the analysis of consumption goods to that of the individual's satisfaction is inadequate, since goods perform different roles besides this one and anyway satisfaction is not absolute and individual but relative and social.

Concepts such as utility, scarcity and value cannot be uncritically used but must be discussed and analyzed since it is the cultural system which defines the utility of goods, their exchange value and the relationship between value and scarcity. Scarcity in fact does not automatically imply an increase in the value of goods. What we spend for an ox tongue, for example, is proportionally less than for a steak even if from a single animal we obtain only one tongue but several steaks. Social and cultural elements determine the value and utility of goods. If the analysis is limited to the level of the single individual, some relevant aspects of the problem are missed. The utilitarian approach neglects important elements in the explanation of consumption activity; in particular it fails to grasp other uses goods have besides that of satisfaction of specific needs. Sub-cultural patterns of consumption, fashion, lifestyles, are all phenomena, which emphasize the complexity of motivations, rooted in social and cultural contexts, which, induce to consume.

3.2. Induced needs

A different interpretation of consumption is available in that sociological tradition where an important weight is given to the individual's need of conformity with reference groups, with social values. Riesman's analysis of 'other-direction', that is the tendency of individuals to be increasingly influenced by their peers, is probably the most popular contribution to this perspective. The relationship between individual and objects present in the utilitarian model is replaced, in sociological analysis, by the relation between individuals and norms; mainly the norm of conformity, of 'keeping up with the Joneses'. While in the utilitarian model the individual is considered essentially free and independent, according to this second model he is dependent on a society that conditions personal choices and creates new needs. This interpretation is quite evident in the work of authors such as Packard, and Dichter, and in Galbraith's economic version.

In these works there is present an image of society that in a way reduces the individual consumer to a sort of puppet, obedient to the will of the producers. Implicit in these analyzes there is the idea that if hypothetically producers did stimulate consumption on purpose and create new needs, it would be possible to reach a sort of equilibrium between wants and needs. As has been said, it is restrictive to identify needs with goods, with commodities. It is meaningless to speak of a single need related to a single good since the reasons for which people want goods are more complex and needs constitute an indefinite system that cannot be satisfactorily related to the process of consumption which has to do only with the moment of satisfaction and often, as we shall see, with a very precarious satisfaction. In fact not all our needs can be satisfied through the

consumption of goods. Consumption, therefore, may often constitute a palliative which soothes temporarily our uneasiness, anxiety, etc., which cannot find a real and complete attainment. To speak of a situation of equilibrium does not make sense; it is not possible to consider needs as commodities, as one as the reciprocal of the other. As Riesman pointed out, the criterion according to which we want objects is objectless craving.

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Biographical Sketch

Luisa Leonini is professor of sociology at Milan State University, Italy. She is chair of the M A in Communication and Society at the Faculty of Political Science. Professor Leonini's research and teaching

interests are focoused in a number of areas. One is consumption with particoular interest in gender and sub-cultural differences in patterns of consumption and life styles. A second area of interest is the globalization of markets and the consequences on individuals everyday life in contemporary multiethnic societies. She has written several books and articles on these subjects.

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