

Consumerism is the Core Ideology of the Capitalism

Nimet HARMANCI

Faculty of Communication

Girne American University

Girne - North Cyprus Via Mersin 10 - Turkey

Introduction

This essay addresses the statement on ‘Consumerism is the core ideology of the capitalism’. Firstly, the essay explains Globalization and how the Globalization developed to all around the world. Then focus on Culture-Ideology of Consumerism in the Third World. The discussion proceeds with the Consumer Culture. Finally, it concludes with the idea of Capitalism requires ever expanding markets.

In the present era, the same old world seems to shrink due to the power of advanced communication. By just sitting in their living room, people know what is going on in the other part of the world. “Globalization” becomes prominent catch phase of the 1990s. It has brought about a unitary status. The global is integrated into the culture of the other parts of the world, particularly into the Third World countries, through the economic and media systems. It can be said that cultural invasion originates from consumerism, distributed worldwide by transnational corporations (TNCs) and multinational corporations (MNCs) and reinforced profoundly by advertising. In other to understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to examine through the original process in which the problem arises.

The industrial Revolution in Europe during the eighteenth century marked an eminent change in the history of Western development. Due to the expansion of mechanical inventions, old pattern of life was replaced by modern life-style; rural self-sufficient society was superseded by urban wage-slavery society. People worked harder to earn more money in order to gain power to purchase. The traditional way of living was no longer adequate to sustain the need of modern people. Their life has become endless struggle to possess more. Since then, these countries, which are presently called “more developed countries” (MDCs), have greatly developed in their economy and technology. Simultaneously, the other three-quarter of the globe, which are called “less developed countries” (LDCs) were left behind, generating an enormous gap between these two groups. People in LDCs commence to strive to gain their appropriate place in new societies and are engaged in the process of pursuing new relationship with their fellow men. It has come to be accepted that MDCs have a responsibility to aid LDCs in order to bring them out of the poorer condition of life and lead them towards stage of ‘modernity’.

Hall, Held and McGrew (1992:2) describe ‘modernity’ as the distinct and unique form of social life, which characterizes modern societies. It is the sum of different forces and processes, which includes “the political (the rise of the secular state and polity), the economic (the global capitalist economy), the social (formation of classes and an advanced sexual and social division of labor) and the cultural (the transition from a religious to a secular culture).”

Increasingly, modern societies are marked by the abundance of consumer products and various life-styles. Individuals pursue the possibility in shaping new identities. Modern society evolves at the intersection of local and global conditions. Through unequal exchange of both material and culture, Western countries, obviously USA, attempt to establish their identity and values in the rest of the world. It is this notion that brought about the emergence of mass media in the global scale.

From Global Society to Consumer Society

According to Giddens (1990:64) ‘globalization’ is the “intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.” Appadurai (1990) diagrammes five dimension of global flow as ethnoscapes, different racial people moving from one place to another; technoscapes, mechanical and informational technology flowing across borders; finanscapes, money as transnational commodity;

mediascapes and ideoscapes which are called 'landscape of images', composing of elements of the enlightenment world-view. These flows lead to 'Deterritorialization' that means reduction of territorial importance. This has become the fertile ground in which TNCs and MNCs such as trade companies or entertainment industry have grown constantly, spreading consumerism worldwide.

In "Consumption and the World of Goods", Brewer and Porter (1993:2) explain that:

"For the concept of consumer society has far wider signification, characterizing social orders whose expectations, whose hopes and fears, whose prospects of integration, harmony or dissolution, increasingly depended upon the smooth operation and continued expansion of the system of goods."

Consumption has then become the active searching for personal gratification through material goods. People in the modern society are absorbed into the vicious circle of consumption, which is to buy products, use them, throw them away and buy them again. They are convinced to believe that by consuming these goods, they can be fulfilled materially and socially. Most often that social need seems to overtake material need in influencing purchaser's decision-making.

The social world of invention, taste and production is associated with the world of sociability, experimentation and enjoyment through consumption. Appleby (1993) explains that there are three facets of human experience to be incorporated in a theory of consumption. They are self-indulgence, personal identity and privacy. He claims that consumption makes people indulge themselves, seeking gratification immediately and tangibly and offer them objects to incorporate into their lives and their presentation of self. Moreover, the expanded world of goods stimulates people to form privacy and intimacy.

Accordingly, Lears (1983), examines the role of consumption, advertising and the media in the movement of capitalist society. He notes that during the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, a culture of Puritanism, which referred to work and self-denial, was substituted by a culture of hedonism that directed at leisure and self-fulfillment. People then suffered from strains, producing by modernity. "Feelings of unreality stemmed from urbanization and technological development, from the rise of an increasingly interdependent market economy; and from the secularization of liberal Protestantism among its educated and affluent devotees." (Lears, 1983 cited in Jhally, 1990:190).

Max Weber (1958:60) once says: "A man does not 'by nature' wish to earn more and more money, but to live as he is accustomed to live and to earn as much as is necessary for that purpose." Consumerism, therefore, encourages people to work harder, to earn more money and ultimately to spend more, or another word, to enter the capitalist system.

The Culture-Ideology of Consumerism in the Third World

The 'Modernization theory' was developed in the 1950s and the 1960s, based on the polar opposites of traditional and modern. The main idea was that in order to develop, the countries of the Third and Second worlds would have to become more like the countries of the First World in their economic, political and value systems. Economic and political conditions seemed unproblematic by theoretically. Some form of free enterprise capitalist economy and some form of pluralist democracy were called for. On the other hand, some rather vague ideas about the need for individual achievement and entrepreneurial spirit, following the lead of Max Weber, the system of values necessary for development remained elusive. Sklair (p.129) points out the value system appropriate for the transition to capitalist modernization is the culture-ideology of consumerism.

Wells has suggested that the concept of 'modernization' needs to be analytically split and replaced by the concepts of 'consumerism' (defined as the increase in consumption of the material culture of the developed countries) and 'producerism' (increased mobilization of a society's population to work, and to work more productively in the non-consumerist sector of the economy).

Thus it follows that 'development requires the maximization of producerism' (Wells, 1972:47-48) and that consumerism is 'basically antithetical to development'. He creates a useful typology (ibid., p.195), distinguishing high producer-consumer societies (overdeveloped hedonistic), high consumer and low producer (declining parasitic), low producer-consumer (underdeveloped traditional) and high producer and low consumer (ascetic developmental). High producer and consumer societies, like those of North America and Western Europe are actually in the process of developing politically important movements that are challenging consumerism.

Those societies that score low on both measures, particularly the African and Asian Fourth World, score low not because of conscious choice but because of lack of means of production and lack of spending power. Their elites, small as they are, consume prodigiously. The only type difficult to identify is the high consumer and low producer, the stagnant or declining parasitic societies.

The final type is where changes have been taking place in the last decade. Some communist and socialist societies, particularly China during the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), well fit the description of ascetic developmentalism, where high producerism, especially the promotion of heavy industry and capital goods, is combined with low consumerism, the result of policies that hold down increases in the disposable income of the masses. Wells argued that premature consumerism, can never lead to development, even when promoted by an industrial policy based on import substitution. The conclusion that he draws is that those who genuinely want development should encourage coercive producerist elites (Sklair, 1991:130-131).

The United States is a strong influence for consumerism and a very weak influence for producerism in Latin American television which Wells' own substantive research, on the effects of television in Latin America showed this important point. According to this point it is difficult to see how consumerism as opposed to producerism can be said to serve the national interests of the United States in the Third World and it is very easy to see how consumerism can be said to serve the interests of the global capitalist system, dominated as it has been for much of the twentieth century by TNCs domiciled in the United States (Sklair, 1991:131). The dynamic of permanently increasing the consumption of the products of capitalist enterprise feeds through the profit maximizing practices of each individual unit to the system as a whole, irrespective of the consequences for the planet in which it happens to be located. The specific task of the global capitalist system in the Third World is to promote consumerism among people with no regard for their own ability to pay for what they are consuming. Depends on the above idea, Sklair said that the consumerism has nothing to do with satisfying people's biological needs, for people will seek to satisfy these needs without prompting from anyone else, but with creating what can be called *induced wants* and he suggest that after people's biological needs have been satisfied there is an almost limitless variety of wants that can be induced. Patterns of socialization either structure these wants in the interests of external interests, global capitalism and other-worldly religions being two examples, or encourage individuals and groups to follow their own more arbitrary tastes (p.131-132).

This implies that people in the Third World have to be taught how to consume, in the special sense of creating and satisfying induced wants (see Belk, 1988a). Advertising, the main (but not the only) channel through which the culture-ideology of consumerism is transmitted, has often projected itself as an educational, or at very least, an informational, practice (see Sinclair, 1987). The study of the mass media in the Third World, and their relationship with advertising, is the obvious place to begin to search out the ways in which the culture-ideology of consumerism works.

The transnational advertising agencies (TNAAs) are increasingly active in the Third World. They directly produce advertisements in the Third World countries and indirectly tutor domestic agencies that will produce advertisements for TNC products and services through global marketing strategies. These take up more and more Third World radio, television and printed media space (Anderson, 1984; Sinclair, 1987). Studies of the TNAAs provide a good test for the view that we should be looking not at the increase or decrease of 'Americanization' in the Third World but at the inroads that the culture-ideology of consumerism in making in Third World societies.

The TNAAs achieve the desired societal changes is through projective advertising, the technique of producing new needs/wants as components of a new lifestyle, which is replacing suggestive advertising. The global advertising campaign, already used successfully by many TNCs, for example 'Cola wars, Gerber (baby food), and Nestle (instant coffee)'. While Gramsci argued in the 1930s that collective consciousness or common sense is unordered and inconsistent although directed by the dominant ideology, "the dominant ideology of our times is consumerism and its particular strength may derive from the fact that it helps to order the unordered elements of the collective consciousness" (Janus, 1986:137). She cites Cathelat's idea that advertising is a 'supralanguage' where it is the products' associations rather than the products themselves that are crucial, prior to the use of language. Advertising is a vital link between material and social relations, transforming producers into consumers, by transforming captains of industry into 'captains of consciousness' as Ewen argues (1976). According to UNESCO's report (1976) for the 1970s, %36.5 of Thai TV time was devoted to foreign, mostly US imports; and in 1973, almost %90 of the films shown in Argentina were foreign made, %37 from the US (Guback and Varis, 1982 ch.4).

The point is that Thailand, Argentina and Nigeria (and most other developing countries), as well as Japan and Western Europe, are exposed to media messages of US origin extolling the virtues of capitalist consumerism daily and at a high level of intensity.

An industry central to the culture-ideology of consumerism is processed fast foods. This has spread with remarkable speed in the First World, is accelerating in the Third World and is belonging to take off in the Second World. Palmer (1985) argues that the international fast food sector has grown so quickly because it is seen as 'non-threatening' to the host countries. Fast food franchising outside the United States seems to benefit all the players, and its success is assured due to 'a growing preference for American fast food over local products' (Palmer, 1985:72). McDonald's phenomenon is a best example for the peculiar significance of fast food franchising is its connection with the home and its effects on the reconceptualization of leisure time and family life. The entry of McDonald's into the some Third World countries brought competition to a local industry that was satisfying local demand and responsible for an outflow of foreign exchange (Sklair, 1991:153).

For example, McDonald's opened its first outlet in Manila in 1981, followed rapidly by others. The positive effects on the economy of the Philippines have primarily been in employment (particularly of students), training of staff (McDonald's is renowned for its methods of instilling efficiency) and domestic linkages (the creation and/or encouragement of high standard local suppliers). Kacker suggests some reasons for increased competition. Some TNCs have been involved in mass retailing in the Third World, for example Bata sells its own shoes, Singer sells its own sewing machines and Sears, Woolworths and Safeways between them sell almost everything. Transnational corporation presence, he argues, can be very beneficial, by transferring expertise and stimulating local suppliers. This often entails cutting out the middleman, as the experience of IBEC supermarkets in Latin America and Migros-Turk in Turkey, showed, and competition between small domestic retailers can also result. Evidence suggests that most TNC retailers eventually rely mostly on domestic suppliers and that if they do raise prices, barriers to entry in the food sector are so low that those who do would instantly face fierce competition. Thus, by helping to transform retailing 'Sears, Roebuck is well-known all over the world for making a significant contribution in the creation of a middle class' (Kacker, 1988:40).

As a result, global consumerism set out to document the spread of the culture-ideology of consumerism in the Third World. Most of the Third World thinkers fear most about the impact of the TNCs on their countries in the future. The spread of the new international division of labour (NIDL), in its widest sense, has indeed brought many jobs and a good deal of prosperity to the transnational capitalist class and other groups in the Third World. On the other hand, many in the Third World believe that, despite the apparent successes of the culture-ideology of consumerism, the material benefits, such as they are, will never percolate through to the masses. Jayaweera (1986) says: "capitalism will also have left behind in the Third World, as its most enduring contribution to Third World development, an almost unfettered and wild consumerism, undergirded by the new electronic entertainment technologies". He concludes on the grim note that "when production pulls back to the metropolitan centers, and the offshore enclaves are dismantled, those tastes and aspirations will remain, along with the TV and video networks that nourished them" (Jayaweera, 1986: 42-43). Not many people share the view that capitalism in the Third World will end in this way, but most would agree that the TNCs have played a crucial role in raising consumerist expectations that cannot be satisfied within the foreseeable for the mass of the population in the Third World (Sklair, 1991:166).

Consumer Culture

'Consumer Culture' within debates concerning whether advanced capitalist societies have entered into post-modernity or an information age by which traditional social structures of meaning have been eroded. In what Jameson (1984) terms late, consumer or multi-national capitalism, consumption may be viewed as: "a social and cultural process involving cultural signs and symbols, not simply as an economic utilitarian process" (Bocock, 1993:3). This is not to ignore fundamental economic factors impinging on people's lives, which may well determine- or limit-, their patterns of consumption. However, it can be argued that consumption in the social formations of late western capitalism is: "based increasingly upon desires, not simply upon need." (Bocock, 1993:3). The implication is that privatized consumption practices, together with shifting, underlying social changes are having a greater influence upon the construction of personal identity. The work of Veblen, Bourdieu, and Baudrillard is examined to trace the theorization of consumption practices from the satisfaction of utilitarian material needs to symbolic, idealist needs however, to counter any notion of economic or textual determinism, the concept of the 'active' consumer is explored.

One cannot attempt to theorize consumption practices without engaging with the debate as to whether western capitalism has entered into a postmodern phase, resulting in an epochal change from the social formations of 'modern' society. Proponents of postmodern theory situate its emergence in the rapid growth of consumerism in the U.S. in the 1950's.

According to Lyotard (1984) and Baudrillard (1988) there has been a major break from capitalism is very difficult to sustain as it continues to perform the dominant mode of production and consumption around the globe, particularly with the collapse of state socialism in the former East European bloc and the rapid embracement of capitalism by China under the economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping.

Jameson (1984) explains the new phase in social formations: the postmodern.

"It is ..., at least in my use, a periodizing concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order – what is often euphemistically called modernization, post industrial or consumer society, the society of the media or the spectacle, or multinational capitalism. This new moment of capitalism can be dated from the post-war boom in the United States in the late 1940's and 1950's" (Jameson, 1984:15).

Smith says: "This notion of post modernity implies a phase in the periodization of capitalism characterized as involving a shift towards consumption as a central social, economic and cultural process. It also implies that capitalism is becoming more global in its impact as a result of the expansionist strategies of multi-national or transnational companies with the concomitant collapse of time and space and the social impact on global/local communities. It can be viewed that the term postmodern suggests the idea that social classes are of less importance in the minds of individuals than the construction of individual social identity/identities. However, sweeping theorizations need to be treated with caution, as the economic imbalance of wealth, within nations states and throughout the globe is empirically evident with approx. 1bn of the globes population of 5.5bn consuming approx 80% of production" (Smith, 1997:15).

Jean Baudrillard, initially derived from Marxian and Weberian sociology, has developed a more radical theory of consumption. Baudrillard conceptualizes consumption as a process in which consumers purchase goods in order to create and maintain a sense of identity and difference from others through the display of purchase goods. Also, Baudrillard argues that consumption has taken off into a hyper-real, symbolic level so that the idea of purchasing as much as the act of purchasing operates as a motivation for many in doing paid work. The argument therefore is that consumption, as the active ideology of capitalism, promises that the meaning of life will be found in buying things and pre-packaged experiences. Therefore the ideology of consumerism serves both to legitimate capitalism and motivate people to become consumers in fantasy as well as reality.

If we accept Baudrillard's hypothesis, it is only one further step to assume that through consumption, we can actually transform the sense of who are by purchasing commodities. By consuming clothes, perfume, jeweler, holidays, etc, people can gain access to another lifestyle by sharing the same set of signs signifiers and symbols. It is in this sense that Baudrillard views consumption as the consumption of signs and symbols rather than utilitarian material objects. However, Baudrillard argues that the anticipation of consumption is frequently experienced as being more enjoyable than the act of consumption itself, which sets up a process of a constant desire to consume and an endless deferring of satisfaction. As Baudrillard argues:

"there are no limits to consumption... If it was that which is naively taken to be, absorption, a devouring, then we should achieve...satisfaction. But we know that this is not the case: we want to consume more and more...If consumption appears to be irrepressible, this is precisely because it is a total idealist practice which has no longer anything to do (beyond a certain point) with the satisfaction of needs..." (Baudrillard, 1988:24).

In summary, according to Baudrillard, consumption cannot be thought of as the satisfaction of a biologically determined set of needs. If the need is food, it is social and cultural factors within advanced capitalist societies that transform this need into a desire (want) for lobster and champagne, tofu stir-fry or a McDonalds hamburger.

Conclusion

This essay has been concerned with the globalization and consumer culture. Consumerism is the central point of the globalization. Global capitalist system is to promote consumerism among people with no regard for their own ability to pay for what they are consuming.

At this point return to our central question ‘Consumerism is the core ideology of the Capitalism’. I think it is because capitalism requires ever expanding markets. As Marx and Engels argued:

“ The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere. The bourgeoisie has through its..., there arises a world literature. The bourgeoisie, by the rapid..., it creates a world after its own image. The bourgeoisie has subjected the country..., the East on the West” (1967:83-84).

In one sense we can argue that the author of this engine of capitalism products and exploitation is consumerism and that in this way consumerism is a to all intends and purpose the core ideology of capitalism.

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