

Sociology and consumerism

Government, Capitalism



Throughout history the connection between mass consumption and modern capitalism has been part of critical social changes that have taken place around the world, beginning during the modernity and post-modernity eras. Historically, mass consumption has been the driving force behind capitalism along with its dynamic and social structure. Although capitalism is partially built on democracy, there are underlying issues in our society today that are not strictly caused by consumption itself but its patterns and effects. Thus, to further understand these concepts that shape the aspects of mass consumption and consumerism today, the historic ideals from the founding fathers of sociology, Marx, Weber and Durkheim are essential in finding how these topics evolved, and have been deemed problematic in society over vast time periods. As a result of previous social changes throughout history, it seems as if society today is experiencing an economic crisis as a result of consumerism. There is a lack of business regulation, including poor behavior among individuals participating. Throughout the world, the economy consists of billions of transactions every single day. Yet, there can never be enough people to monitor such extensive activity 24/7. Not only that, but individuals in charge with enforcing regulations is still susceptible to corruption, and should be held accountable for the unlawful actions of others. However, regulation of businesses is not the only issue our economy is faced with at the moment, it's also how consumers have an internalized way of thinking, in which we don't realize that in reality we have very limited real needs. Thus, consumerism essentially becomes a social disease when society attempts to satisfy higher needs through acquisition of basic goods and services (Etzioni, "The Crisis of American Consumerism"). Moreover, the extreme power of

advertising also affects our current economic crisis to manipulate society in what goods and services they should buy. Advertising agencies do this in such a way to symbolize attributes that are craved with ads ranging from what toothpastes to purchase, shoes or even cars. In theory, Karl Marx's analysis on commodities and consumption gives a sociological explanation as to why such crisis with the economy do tend to exist years ago and even now as well. He explains that production under capitalism is for the purpose of profit and the product strictly under the company who made it. Whereas, before the Great Transformation, patina goods played a major role in the concept of a person since it held significant meaning to their life, and held together the reciprocal contract of family. Similarly, people were encouraged to buy within in the market as a way for money to be exchanged for goods and services, otherwise known as the " Mode of Production. " " This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production" (Marx. Engels, Tucker, 150). In other words, Marx believed that under capitalism all things had a price and all things could be satisfied with a fee. His analysis shows that consumption is problematic since after the assembly line was formed people lost any type of connection they had with good they purchased. In essence, it dehumanizes or alienates people in which we become disconnected to

what we produce. Likewise, society places such a value on money, in which it exists in such mystic proportions, when in reality it's an inanimate object that we as people rain it to be supreme. Marx called this the fetishism of the commodity that is as relevant today as it was more than one hundred years ago. It is clear that people view themselves through commodities to express social status (Gottdiener 2). To pursue the topic of status further, Max Weber believed that wealth and status had a direct correlation to one another, whereas Marx didn't see much of a difference. Weber's approach to capitalism was based on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In a situation such as an economic crisis of consumerism and mass consumption, weber would focus on the religious aspects such of Calvinism and what role it played in the capitalistic spirit. On the contrary to Marx, Weber believed that profit was viewed as a virtuous aspect of the spirit of capitalism and that religion was the underlying cause of economic issues. "In fact, the summum bonum of this ethic, the earning of more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life, is above all completely devoid of any...say hedonistic, admixture. It is thought of so purely as an end in itself, that from the point of view of the happiness of, or utility to, the single individual, it appears entirely transcendental and absolutely irrational. Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life. Economic acquisition is no longer subordinated to man as the means for the satisfaction of his material needs. This reversal of what we should call the natural relationship, so irrational from a naïve point of view, is evidently as definitely a leading principle of capitalism as it is foreign to all peoples not

under capitalistic influence" (Weber, 18). In other words, since Weber believe in the religious view of predestination, in which Calvinists viewed their success in life as a sign from God. Weber argued that the Calvinistic view on the economic system attitude allowed for modern capitalism to occur (Gottdiener 4). However, Weber's view on asceticism was not in favor of the view that one should enjoy life its opportunities, that as a result in taking place in such acts it would defer people away from religion. " That powerful tendency toward uniformity of life, which today so immensely aids the capitalistic interest in the standardization of production, had its ideal foundations in the repudiation of all idolatry of the flesh" (Weber, 5). As a result, people felt obligated to hold on to their money and other belongings in order to seek God's approval. However, this was strictly based on hard earned money as a result from working, not greed or want to be rich. In this case, the idea of saving money rather than spending did appear throughout history at one point in time, however it would be interesting to see this approach today since society is encourage to consistently buy into the market. On the contrary to both Marx and Weber, Emile Durkheim would approach consumerism and mass consumption with the idea of solidarity among people in society. Although Durkheim's analysis doesn't address consumption directly, he focuses on the non-material social facts and collective representations, in which he was more interested in moral values that people had in common amongst one another. For example, there are plenty of relatable images in today's media that people share a commonality. Durkheim's way of portraying social bonds actually gave more information about the culture versus the economy. In other words, mass

culture could effected mass consumptions in which it brought society together in the form of social solidarity and social institutions (Gottdiener, 6). By using Durkheim's approach, it could very well be implied specifically when addressing the issue of inequality of mass consumption. Moreover, Durkheim's theory deemed capitalism as being problematic in relation to suicide as well. His approach to capitalism and its effects on suicide was analyzed with his definition of Egoistic suicide. Thus, people who fell into this category had an overwhelming sense of individualism, or a lack of meaning in "genuinely collective activity" (Miller, 546). Similarly, this decline of social detachments can be compared with Marx's idea of alienation of humans during production, which can result in such thoughts that Durkheim proposes. In regards to the lack of regulation in business today, Durkheim's theory of Anomic suicide would give fruitful result in why people struggle in an economy, along with the absence of a spirit of discipline (Miller, 546). All things considered, consumerism and mass consumption have become problematic when the act of consumption negatively affects our role as social beings, rather than one expression of that role. There is no question that we all consume, but there is still a lack of participation when it comes to equality among social groups and relationships that go far beyond consumption. Consumers in today's society and in the past have essentially been the basis of capitalism as a whole, considering we're the ones that do the buying and create trends in regards to productivity and consumption. Above all, consumerism creates a loss of any true understanding or connection in which we have with the goods and services we buy and produce. As Marx states, it alienates the labor of society. Overall it's the

consumers responsibility is to advocate for the best quality goods and reasonable prices. In reality, the historic social phenomenon of capitalism, consumerism and mass production have resulted in society conforming to mass marketing ideals, which have caused a strain on the economy and society. Our role in such a representative democracy today is merely a way to become marketed to and be persuaded to select the best value for us as individuals (Alexander, " The Problem"). Today it seems as if we veered away from consumerism, normative change is possible, especially in a time of economic crisis. As a result of capitalism, consumerism, mass production, etc. many people in society are forced to make ends meet, and conform to buying name brand clothing and good to represent a significant status. However, the majority of the time, individuals are buying things they don't really need. This sort of mentality has been integrated in American culture for so long that people are unaware of their consistent participation. However, society has the potential to shift direction gradually if people turn the current economic crisis into a " liberation from the obsession with consumer goods and begin to rethink their definition of what it means to live a good life" (Etzioni, The Crisis of American Consumerism."). Furthermore, the historical theories from our fathers of sociology give a critical analysis of such social phenomena that existed years ago and today, and what the basis of change would have to include, as well as the impacts the economy and society would endure if such a dramatic change from consumerism went into effect. Works cited Alexander, Jon. " The Problem." Consumer Economy. N. p., 29 Apr. 2010. Web. 25 Oct. 2012. . Etzioni, Amitai. " The Crisis of American Consumerism." Huff Post Politics. The Huffington Post, 09 Sept.

2012. Web. 25 Oct. 2012. . Gottdiener, Mark. New Forms of Consumption: Consumers, Culture, and Commodification. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000. Print. Marx, Karl, Friedrich Engels, and Robert C. Tucker. The Marx-Engels Reader. New York: Norton, 1978. Print. Miller, Daniel. Disciplinary Approaches to Consumption. London [u. a.: Routledge, 2001. Print. Weber, Max. The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism and Other Writings. N. p.: Routledge, 1992. Print.