

## CONSUMERISM AND ITS CONTRADICTIONS

©Mica Nava

Published in *Cultural Studies* 1:2, 204-210 (1987)

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09502388700490151>

Over the last year or two a number of articles about the dilemmas raised by the buying of things, by style, self-adornment and the consumption of images, have appeared in the pages of magazines like *Marxism Today*, *New Socialist* and *Women's Review*, as well as in a range of less well-known academic journals and anthologies. Broadly, the debates have been concerned to establish whether an acknowledgement of the stubborn and complex pleasures afforded by these phenomena is evidence of a more sensitive and progressive analysis than hitherto - capable ultimately of providing the groundwork for a more popular political appeal to both men and women - or whether, as has also been argued, these preoccupations are diversionary, evidence merely of a mid-1980s capitulation to the right, an obfuscation of the stark reality of capitalism's uncompromising hunger for new markets.

These questions clearly have political as well as theoretical implications; indeed, they combine in quite a unique fashion some of the major concerns of socialists and feminists. What I intend to do in this brief article is to clarify some of the substantive issues at stake here by placing them in their historical context. In this way we may be able to put into perspective and refine evaluations of some of the more recent developments in the debate.

It was the intellectual and political climate of the United States during the 1950s which provided the conditions for the emergence of some of the most virulent critiques of consumerism in the post-war period. This was the moment of the expansion of domestic markets, of the suburban housewife, 'consensus' and McCarthyism. It was a period of political conservatism in which the 'free choice' of goods came to symbolize the 'freedom' of the Free World. The consumer society, as a distinctive form of advanced capitalism, relies to an unprecedented degree for its perpetuation upon the media, advertising, spectacle, fashion and the image. Although a critical analysis of these aspects of mass culture was initiated by the Frankfurt school in the 1930s, it was not until the fifties and sixties that it really gained momentum. Herbert Marcuse, European Marxist and author of the seminal counter-culture text *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), and Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* (1965), were two of the most influential contributors to the radical critique in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Both operated with the conviction that cultural forms have the power to construct 'false needs', to indoctrinate and manipulate men and women into social conformity and subordination. Friedan, one of the first to focus on the significance of consumerism in

perpetuating the particularities of women's oppression in post-war America, quotes an executive of the hidden-persuasion business: 'Properly manipulated... American housewives can be given the sense of identity, purpose, creativity, the self-realization, even the sexual joy they lack - by the buying of things.'<sup>2</sup> The notion expressed here of the individual as passive victim is also reflected in other more mainstream discourses of that moment. The plausibility of the idea of 'brainwashing' - by communists and advertisers alike - gained considerable ground in the course of the fifties and sixties, and continues to have purchase to this day.

It is in the context of this conservative climate that we must understand the emergence in the late sixties of the new feminist, socialist and black politics of style. Patched and second-hand clothes represented a rejection of the dominant ethos of consumerism and propriety. Peasant garments marked a display of solidarity with the poor and the Third World. Afro haircuts were a symbol of black American political consciousness; and the feminist appropriation of male workclothes has its own coherence when placed historically as a sequel to the excesses of early sixties sartorial imagery in which woman was cast as helpless yet seductive child, doll, bird, baby, and so on. Thus what we begin to see, as the post-war era pans out behind us, is a period of intense struggle and engagement played out on the terrain of cultural forms and signs; Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen put it thus: 'In a society predicated upon the marketing of images, images become a weapon of resistance.'<sup>3</sup>

However, many of these new images, imagined in the first instance in the explosive climate of 1968 - the politicizing conjuncture for an international generation of young dissidents: war veterans, women, blacks and students - and developed during the seventies, have over the last fifteen years in turn become current socialist and feminist orthodoxies. And with the emergence of municipal socialism in Britain in the eighties, these orthodoxies have acquired a new power base to add to the influence already exercised through other cultural and political forms. Thus we see the consolidation - indeed, the institutionalization in some instances - of some of the moral and stylistic precepts formed by the generation of 1968, the 'old youth' as Frank Mort has recently dubbed them.<sup>4</sup> And, as this new left-feminist consensus gains ground, so it in turn produces its own resistances both within and beyond its immediate sphere of influence. These critical resistances take a range of forms (see, for example, Posy Simmonds's cartoons in the *Guardian*<sup>5</sup>) and cannot, of course, be understood merely as a kind of inevitable generational revolt. They have been partially, and very importantly, fuelled by a keen sense of the failure of the left and feminism, despite considerable gains, to capture popular consciousness as effectively as the right.

All the same, it does seem to be the case that the specificity and significance of a cultural form or cultural analysis is substantially determined

by the historical context of its production and reception - by prevailing discourses. This implies that we can attribute no inherent meanings to fashions or to particular styles of masculinity and femininity. Codes are immensely plastic and are constantly being reworked. Whether make-up renders women respectable or deviant, whether muscular bodies are in or out, whether streamlining is good or bad design,<sup>6</sup> indeed whether form is considered relevant at all - and here I am talking not only about appearances and commodities but also about fashions in language, ideas and morality - is to a large extent consequent upon combinations of existing meanings and the historical moment in which they come into being.

This is not to suggest that epiphenomena of this order are therefore politically unimportant. On the contrary, they clearly manage to address - and hence (potentially) to mobilize - popular imagination and desires in a more profound and all-encompassing way than do some of the classical material issues. Yet we must ask how far the different theoretical and political positions taken up in relation to consumerism have been able to advance the terms of the debate. It could be argued that by continuing to allocate such a central place to the issues involved - to images and commodities - we are not only interrogating but are also contributing to the explosion of discourses on consumerism as a late twentieth-century phenomenon.

Zygmunt Bauman, in an important article on the genealogy of consumerism, has argued that the contemporary focus on the body - on adornment, food, fitness and sport - represents a popular struggle for the reassertion of control, a response to the historical deployment of individualizing techniques of power:

Disciplinary power.., was first and foremost about bodily control. It was the human body which for the first time in history was made, on such a massive scale, an object of drill and regimentation. Later consumerism was a product of failed resistance to such drill and regimentation. But what was negated could not but determine the substance and the form of its negation.<sup>77</sup>

The negation - the refutation - of bodily control and regulation is fought out on a predetermined battleground: the body itself. But in Bauman's account the chances of subversion are limited, in that, historically, consumerism has constituted a form of compensation gained in a trade-off against the encroachment of disciplinary power. Consumerism is theorized here as, at most, a form of displaced resistance, and not, as I would argue, as an ever-expanding discursive apparatus. In addition, despite taking on aspects of Michel Foucault's method, and in the process offering some riveting insights, Bauman seems ultimately to deny the implications of Foucault's own insistence that where there is power, however diffuse or pervasive,

there is the potential for its resistance.

In my opinion Foucault's theoretical framework can be pushed further and made to yield more productive questions and observations; its potential remains relatively unexplored. Thus, drawing on Foucault's model of sexuality,<sup>8</sup> which is neither reductive nor celebratory, consumerism can be argued to exercise control through the incitement and proliferation of increasingly detailed and comprehensive discourses. Yet because of the diffuse nature of this control, because it operates from such a multiplicity of points and is not unitary, it is also vulnerable. If this is the case, then contemporary preoccupations with imagery and the buying of things can be understood not only as part of this new technology of power, but as, variably (sometimes simultaneously), both a form of subjection to it and a form of resistance. They are not inherently one thing or the other, since, if consuming objects and images is potentially subversive, this potential is countered always by its potential reappropriation and transformation into yet another mode of regulation.

Our task, then, must be to detect those developments in consumer discourses (that is to say, modes of thinking as well as modes of operating) which constitute more than mere resistances to previous orthodoxies. Are there contemporary phenomena in the sphere of consumption which could be defined as an advance, as capable of acting upon vulnerable points and hence pushing back the networks of disciplinary power? There are two broad contemporary theoretical and political developments which I think may fall into this category and which are worth exploring to see whether or not they can be made to reveal progressive possibilities.

The first of these is the new, more nuanced understanding of subjectivity. This appears also in recent critical refutations of the notion that the media and advertising have the power to manipulate in a coherent and unfractured fashion<sup>9</sup> and represents a move away from the notion of mass man and woman as duped and passive recipients of conspiratorial messages designed to inhibit true consciousness. Interestingly, in symbiotic relation to this position - the daughter of it, as it were - is the apparently progressive polemical pursuit of 'positive images', a still widely current feminist and socialist convention, which, in addition to embodying rather simple notions of the good and the true, recalls and confirms the idea that images are able to persuade (to brainwash) in an unproblematic manner. The theoretical challenge to this kind of 'old youth' orthodoxy has come from an analysis which insists that the way in which any particular message is interpreted cannot be simply deduced from the intentions of its author/ producer or from an examination of the product itself - or even from its context. Individual responses and criteria of assessment are forged out of and mediated by a range of experiences which pre-empt easy conclusions about meaning and appropriation and which are simultaneously rational and irrational. Current theories of culture and subjectivity take much more

seriously notions of personal agency, discrimination and resistance, as well as (drawing on psychoanalysis) the contradictory and fragmented nature of fantasy and desire. Feminists of the eighties have argued, for example, that women can read glossy magazines critically and selectively yet not disavow more traditional feminine identities and pleasures. In this respect, Suzanne Moore emphasizes the need to 'separate pleasure from the text and commitment to the text';<sup>10</sup> while Douglas Kellner, from a different perspective, has argued forcefully that the desire for commodities is not in itself evidence of duping and indoctrination).<sup>11</sup> Mass man and woman are treated here more respectfully than they used to be.

The second aspect of contemporary consumer discourse which seems to represent a radical break, yet which in terms of its political implications is also open to conflicting interpretations, is played out variously in the arena of sexual politics. Conventionally consumerism has been seen to confirm women in their subordination. A good deal of feminist intellectual work has documented the ways in which women have both been targeted as consumers and done a major part of the labour involved (approximately 80 per cent of purchasing power in the Western world is wielded by women<sup>12</sup>). Another body of work has focused on the crucial part played in this process by advertising and women's magazines. Rather less attention has been paid to the contradictory way in which the relative status and power of women has paradoxically been enhanced by consumer society. Consumption (as a feature of modern capitalism) has offered women new areas of authority and expertise, new sources of income, a new sense of consumer rights; and one of the consequences of these developments has been a heightened awareness of entitlement outside the sphere of consumption (which may well have contributed to the conditions for the emergence of modern feminism<sup>13</sup>). Jacques Donzelot identifies a similar contradictory singling out of women as experts in relation to the family.<sup>14</sup> Thus the buying of commodities and images can be understood both as a source of power and pleasure for women (it has indeed given them a 'sense of identity, purpose and creativity') and simultaneously as an instrument which secures their subordination.

Consumerism as gendered practice has, however, shifted somewhat since the post-war decades examined by Janice Winship.<sup>15</sup> More recently there has been a blurring of the conventional distinctions in the advertising address to men and women; constructions of masculinity and femininity are less fixed; shopping and self-adornment have become less gendered - less specifically female - activities.<sup>16</sup> A cruising of the text of *Arena*, the new fashion magazine for men ('for the Porsche driver with the designer stubble'<sup>17</sup>), reveals men represented in many of the erotic and frivolous ways that feminists have traditionally found so objectionable when deployed in representations of women. (See also the recent *Observer* colour supplement cover with the dreamy male nude.) What we begin to observe, then, is not

only a shift in practice, but also a destabilization of the positioning of men and women in fantasy. At the same time, girls' and women's magazines today, like *Mizz* and *Seventeen*,<sup>18</sup> *Cosmopolitan*, even *Vogue*, and television programmes like *Brookside*, have increasingly become vehicles for the dissemination of ideas and the popularization of issues (among both men and women) placed initially on the political agenda by feminism.

So what are we to make of these developments? How are we to evaluate their significance? I think it is possible to argue that these disparate theories and practices constitute an advance on the cruder certainties of the immediate past precisely because of their more nuanced, complex and contradictory nature. Consumerism is here split from its historic one-to-one relation with production. And, of course, these theorizations have themselves had practical experiential consequences in that they have acted as a form of permission entitling members of today's left intelligentsia<sup>19</sup> to enjoy consuming images and commodities (which of course does not necessarily mean spending lots of money) without having to feel anxious about whether these activities are good and correct. The optimists might argue in addition that, by reacting against the insularity and moralism of much left-feminist thought over recent years, these conceptual and behavioural changes amount to progress in that they are able to lay the groundwork for a less guilt-ridden, more popular politics of resistance which effectively seeks out vulnerable points. But the cynics would respond by insisting on a sharper distinction between what is oppositional and innovative and what is progressive. Judith Williamson has argued forcefully that popular culture must not be exempted from political criticism and exonerated merely because it is new and fun.<sup>20</sup> The cynics might continue by claiming that the optimists' theories are a rationalization of their desires; an accommodative response to the new generation; a way of keeping up; in sum, a cop-out which, particularly during this period of recession, most brutally ignores the material injuries of class.

Which brings us to consumerism as economic activity. Although I have hardly touched on the relationship of consumption to production in this short piece, the crucial existence of such a relationship is largely responsible for shaping commonsense socialist and feminist understanding of the issues involved. Marx himself paid little attention to consumption, but his materialist method has provided the framework for those analyses which focus on the financial and motivational investment of capital (controlled predominantly by men) in the expansion of markets for its commodities - in popular consumption. Capitalism's pursuit of profit means that consumers as well as producers are exploited. It is this kind of approach which underlies so much condemnation of consumerism as practice. Without denying the significance of this, it is at the same time important to recognize the limitations of a neo-Marxist analysis which is not capable of offering us all we need to know about the question. Consumerism does not simply

mirror production. Cultural forms and meanings are not reducible to class and the economic. Consumerism is far more than just economic activity: it is also about dreams and consolation, communication and confrontation, image and identity. Like sexuality, it consists of a multiplicity of fragmented and contradictory discourses. Bauman, like Foucault, has argued that production is not a privileged force but merely one site on which the surveillance of populations is carried out,<sup>21</sup> likewise with consumption. If this is indeed the case, then the implications of any particular consumer practice or argument cannot be anticipated in advance. Consumerism is a discourse through which disciplinary power is both exercised and contested. While not negating its relation to capitalism, we must refuse to return it always to questions of production.

*Department of Cultural Studies, North-East London Polytechnic*

## Notes

Thanks to Mitra Tabrizian and Angela McRobbie for support and comments.

<sup>1</sup> H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1964); B. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965).

<sup>2</sup> Friedan, op. cit., p. 182.

<sup>3</sup> S. Ewen and E. Ewen, *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), p. 244. See also, of course, D. Hebdige, *Subcultures: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979), and, more recently, E. Carter, 'Alice in Consumer Wonderland', in A. McRobbie and M. Nava (eds), *Gender and Generation* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> F. Mort, 'Image change: High Street style and the New Man', *New Socialist*, 43 (November 1986).

<sup>5</sup> See also R. Elms, 'Ditching the Drabbles: a style for socialism', *New Socialist*, 38 (May 1986).

<sup>6</sup> D. Hebdige, 'Towards a cartography of taste 1935-1962', *Block*, 4 (1981).

<sup>7</sup> Z. Bauman, 'Industrialism, consumerism and power', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 1, 3 (1983), p. 40.

<sup>8</sup> M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (London: Allen Lane, 1979).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, J. Root, *Open the Box - About Television* (London:

Comedia, 1986), and K. Myers, *Understains: The Sense and Seduction of Advertising* (London: Comedia, 1986); see also C. Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (London: Virago, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> S. Moore, 'Permitted pleasures', *Women's Review*, 10 (1986), p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> D. Kellner, 'Critical theory, commodities and the consumer society', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 1, 3 (1983).

<sup>12</sup> R. Scott, *The Female Consumer* (London: Associated Business Programmes, 1976).

<sup>13</sup> J. Winship, *Woman Becomes an "Individual": Femininity and Consumption in Women's Magazines 1954-1969*, Occasional Paper no. 65, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1981.

<sup>14</sup> J. Donzelot, *The Policing of Families* (London: Hutchinson, 1980).

<sup>15</sup> Winship, op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> Mort, op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> Reported by Marek Kohn at Left Unlimited, November 1986.

<sup>18</sup> J. Winship, "'A girl needs to get streetwise": magazines for the 1980s', *Feminist Review*, 21 (1985).

<sup>19</sup> A. Barnett, 'Ideas in search of a home', *The Guardian*, 17 November 1986.

<sup>20</sup> J. Williamson, 'The problems of being popular', *New Socialist*, 41 (September 1986).

<sup>21</sup> Bauman, op. cit.