

Krisis

Journal for contemporary philosophy

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BETWEEN SLAVERY AND RESISTANCE: CURRENT POLITICS OF CONSUMERISM

Krisis, 2012, Issue 1

www.krisis.eu

In the sixties and seventies of the last century many philosophers criticized consumerism: the constant and often increasing preoccupation with the acquisition of goods and services. Herbert Marcuse, for instance, argued that consumerism is a form of social control. Seduced by advertising, people consume more than they need to fulfil basic needs and to become happy. According to Marcuse, consumers ignore the alienation, environmental damage and waste caused by their consumerism. Ivan Illich contended that consumerism is even a kind of slavery: “In a consumer society there are inevitably two kinds of slaves: the prisoners of addiction and the prisoners of envy”.

After the 1960s and 1970s consumerism hasn't been robbed of its strength; to the contrary. Globalization gave an enormous boost to consumerism. Since 1950 private consumption expenditure increased worldwide six times, which is only partly due to the growth of the population. Before the economic crisis many consumers in affluent societies spent more than they earned, thanks to personal loans and mortgages.

Since the 1980s there is, on the other hand, an increase of campaigns to boycott certain goods. Lifestyle politics addresses citizens for whom consumption is guided by sustainability, democratic values and human rights. What are the possibilities and limits of such consumer citizenship? Are 'brand bashing', 'Clean Clothes Campaigns' and 'Culture Jamming' new forms of politics that transform the consumer into an economic voter? Or

is political consumption only a marginal phenomenon? Isn't it justified to assert that the consumer triumphed over the citizen? Does the rise of consumer citizenship fit into classical models of democracy? How to think about marketing strategies that sell activism like, for example, Starbucks?

The question is whether current forms of consumerism are not only quantitatively but also qualitatively different from the ones of roughly forty or fifty years ago. And if so, do we need new theories to conceptualize the consumerism of the 21st century? Or are the theoretical notions of Marcuse, Illich and others still fruitful?

A genealogy of consumerism still has to be written. Building blocks of such a genealogy can be found in the work of Walter Benjamin on the commodity fetishism he discovered in the Parisian Arcades of the 19th century, or in Thorstein Veblen's reflections on conspicuous consumption, i.e. unnecessary consumption as a form of status display. However, the envisioned genealogy of consumerism should not ignore Benjamin's insight that consumerism in general, and fashion in particular, are not necessarily and under all circumstances forms of alienation but, at times, rather a way of exploring and understanding the present. Additionally, one should bear in mind that in the late 1950s and 1960s consumerism was part of pop-cultural resistance against economized forms of bourgeois life.

In the manner of Michel Foucault's thinking *Krisis* is interested in the modes and mechanisms that make an individual into a willing subject of consumption, an object of advertisement and consumer studies, or a rather reticent if not resistant subject. In order to understand present consumerisms this special issue of *Krisis* presents new reflections on contemporary practices of consumerism and addresses issues like, for example, consumption as part of a struggle for recognition, frugality, alienation, the alleged transition from class consumption to mass consumption, the conflation of market and political arenas, consumer citizenship, the political manifestations of consumer autonomy, the hypocritical critique of consumption, the use-value and exchange value of commodities, and artistic reflections on consumerism.

In his contribution to this special issue of *Krisis*, Dominik Schrage provides an (eagerly-awaited) genealogy of consumption that has been missing to date. It is a history of present practices of consumption and is critical insofar as it convincingly shows that current manifestations of consumption are historically contingent and could be shaped differently. With his genealogical approach to consumption Schrage challenges the claim that consumption has replaced production as the dominant sphere in society that determines the identity of people.

The ambivalent character of the political role of consumers is the topic of Veronika Kneip's contribution. In order to clarify the reconfigurations of market arenas as opposed to political arenas she explores different conceptualizations of consumer citizenship and reflects on the latter's applicability.

Jörn Lamla aims to develop crucial elements of a cultural theory of the consumer citizen. For that purpose he critically examines three approaches (Riesman, de Certeau, Hirschman) that relate consumption to citizenship. He argues that the enhancement of a consumer democracy should not be delegated completely to the individual actors because such enhancement also requires new institutional arrangements (for instance educational programmes).

No less than his previous books Daniel Miller's recently published study *Consumption and its Consequences* (2012) triggered a fervent debate about the critique of consumption. For Miller is famous for arguing that such critique is, in many cases, all but justified. In her interview with Miller, Andrea Roedig asked the famous scholar to elaborate on his claim that the critique of consumption is hypocritical.

In an essay rife with references to contemporary artistic practices, Ton de Munck reflects on the relation between art and consumerism. He clarifies this relation on the basis of three different concepts of the use-value of a commodity that, by many scholars, is set against exchange value. De Munck's essay confronts readers with the question as to whether art is the embodiment of use-value and therefore the true source of a viable critique on consumption.

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