**Prosumer culture and the question of fetishism[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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**Abstract**

Critical theorists often argue that prosumption leads to new forms of exploitation. For example, social media users generate and produce content for social media pages, but undertake this activity in their leisure time and through their ‘free labour’. Yet, the vast majority are paid nothing by social media companies for their efforts. However, we are sceptical of this particular critical account primarily because we do not believe the framework of ‘exploitation’ is particularly useful when analysing the activity of prosumers. From an alternative Marxist perspective we suggest, instead, that one important element of prosumption lies in its capacity and potential to develop a new fetish for different capitalist relations. Three main groups of theorists are drawn upon to make this argument: Deleuze and Guattari, Adorno and Horkheimer, and Marcuse and Žižek. From Deleuze and Guattari we develop the idea that capitalist desire unleashes affectual and creative energies of fetishism, which today can be channelled into prosumption. From Adorno and Horkheimer, we show that this desire is realised through the adaptation of a factory-style DIY culture to aesthetic production and prosumption within society more generally. From Marcuse we argue that while capitalism instils in people a desire to consume, it also creates a desire to be liberated from capital which also, as Žižek emphasises, becomes in the form of ethical consumption another object to obtain through capital. In conclusion, we suggest these authors provide a theoretical basis to move beyond problematic dualist accounts that divide and separate prosumers and knowledge capitalism from the circuit of industrial capital.

**Key words:**

Adorno and Horkheimer; Deleuze and Guattari; digital culture; fetishism; Marcuse; Marxism; prosumption; Žižek

**Introduction**

During the 1960s, some commentators had noted a distinctive difference in how mass produced goods were being consumed. A typical illustration was the fashion industry, where people willingly devised and ‘co-created’ their own style culture with clothes that reflected their social identities. In other words, they *produced* their fashion style the moment they *consumed* clothes. Notably, the futurologist Alvin Toffler called these ordinary people ‘prosumers’ of goods (Toffler, 1980: 280-281). Recent years have witnessed a new development on the debate about prosumers. One strand in this debate that has gained prominence draws on Marxism and poststructuralism to suggest that users who co-create content on social media sites are exploited because they are not paid for their efforts (Scholz, 2008; see also Beer and Burrows, 2010). Unlike what are arguably more positive accounts that highlight the inventive nature of prosumption and co-creation (see for example Banks and Deuze 2009, Bruns 2008, Galvagno and Dalli, 2014 and Potts et al. 2008a), critical theories therefore believe that prosumption signifies the movement of exploitation outside of the workplace to encompass the whole of society (Hardt and Negri 2000).

Our article also focuses on this latest critical debate about the nature of prosumption. However, rather than highlighting its exploitative nature, we wish to demonstrate its fetishistic form as a way in which it naturalises certain forms of consumption. We make this point through a Marxist perspective. Marx could not of course have anticipated the extent to which prosumption would become such a prominent aspect of capitalist society. Therefore, we draw on theorists who are in vogue, Deleuze and Guattari. Their work is situated on a continuum with Marx insofar that they, like Marx, highlight how the circuits of industrial capital build creative desires and energies, which seek to channel these in certain directions amenable to capital. One way this is achieved today is through the ideological figure of the prosumer, a figure that encourages ‘users’ to channel their individual creative desires into co-creative consumption, which, at the same time, naturalises and empowers capital.

We then discuss how the processes mapped out by Deleuze and Guatarri are transferred to society as a whole. For this task, we turn to the first generation of thinkers associated with the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. With Adorno and Horkheimer we can grasp how on a societal scale the commodity comes to embody our intimate needs and desire. For them, bourgeois conspicuous consumption became rationalised and reproduced for the masses. Consumer goods, said Adorno and Horkheimer (1997: 154), were like mass-produced Yale locks, the difference between them ‘measured in fractions of millimetres’, and by identifying with such miniscule differences people became pseudo-individuals. Recalling Adorno’s critique of a ‘do-it-yourself syndrome’, the paper thus identifies prosumption as symptom of fetishisation in everyday life, and the object of prosumer creation a miniscule variation on a standardised theme.

By synthesising Marx and Freud in his analysis of capitalism and desire, it is useful to move onto Herbert Marcuse in order to understand how prosumption unleashes new desires of consumption, which, while they contain ideological residues, also unleash the desire for liberation against endless consumption. Writing in 1964, Marcuse’s book *One-dimensional Man* suggested that the pseudo-individual had given way to the happy consciousness whose apparent ease with the capitalist system belied a deeper turmoil, which consumer products helped to ameliorate. The checkout became the outlet for one-dimensional man’s frustrations, a temporary release from the fact that he had no determination in his life to challenge his alienated existence. Žižek makes corresponding claims in respect to ethical consumption which, through Lacan, we also touch on. We suggest that prosumption can be thought of as the checkout for today, but it also engenders a real space for the release of desire from capitalist consumption norms.

Our primary aim in this paper is therefore concerned with developing a set of *theoretical* tools with which to gain a critical perspective on prosumption. Rather than propose answers the article invites the reader, as Deleuze and Guattari might say, to join us on theoretical lines of flight. We begin our argument, first, by looking at some of the critical theories of prosumption.

**Critical theories of prosumption**

According to Richard Florida, who sits on the more optimistic side of the prosumer debate, the creative industries have nurtured a creative class – those who work in occupations that include fashion, IT, cultural heritage, art galleries, museums, events, architecture, film, music, performing arts, and advertising – who believe that economic growth depends on the creative ideas that people hold and which flow freely between them through communication networks (Florida, 2002: 36-37). For example, it is said that one innovative feature of the creative industries is that they often operate through ‘word of mouth, taste, cultures, and popularity, so that such that individual choices are dominated by information feedback over social networks rather than innate preferences and price signals’ (Potts et al., 2008a: 169-170). Digital media have given rise to new patterns of consumer-to-consumer and consumer-to-production networks leading to innovation in the economy ‘that integrate consumer or user expertise into producer models of design and development activities’ (Potts et al., 2008b: 463; see also Banks and Humphreys, 2008: 414; Castells, 2001: 140). `

However, critical theorists have questioned some of the assumptions and evidence in these accounts. To begin with, it is not uncommon for knowledge-based organisations to simplify work-related tasks, which lead not to high-tech co-creative skills but to the fragmentation and intensification of routinized practices for digital labour (Boreham et al., 2008: 111; Thompson et al., 2016: 319). The coding of workplace data, for instance, often enacts new performance targets for employees that then fragment and deskill work patterns (Carter et al., 2011; 2014). Moreover, many employment sectors in the informational economy are defined, in part, by relatively weak legal protection for the rights of employees, with little or no trade union representation (Clement et al., 2010; Cushen, 2013; Tomaney, 1994). For numerous employees working in knowledge-based and creative industries, the reality is often ‘the disintegration of stable careers and discontinuous employment’ (Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft, 2013: 966; see also Aronowitz and DiFazio, 2010; Vivant, 2013). Others have to engage in multi-tasking to make themselves more employable, but acquiring different skills can take time away from developing creative ideas in the first place (Donald et al., 2013: 15). Ironically, those who give their labour ‘freely’ to help co-create consumer objects like open source software will often do so to demonstrate to prospective employers ‘their employment potential’ (Ross, 2013: 219), yet in reality many occupations in the IT sector suffer from precarious working conditions (see also Peck, 2010: 219; Pratt, 2011: 127).

Given that critical accounts of the creative and co-creative sectors highlight problems in real working conditions within those sectors, it is perhaps unsurprising to find that some scholars have sought to develop new critical *theories* of prosumption. For example, some Marxists argue that social media sites represent new sources of exploitation in the form of surplus value extraction and new outlets for capitalist accumulation. Fuchs, for example, contends that social media users represent exploited labour because their ‘constant online activity is necessary for running and targeting algorithms and for generating viewing possibilities and attention for ads. The ad space can therefore only exist based on user activities that are the labour that create the social media prosumer commodity’ (Fuchs, 2015: 163). Users freely create new content for multinational companies through their desires, passions, excitements, loves, dislikes, and so on. As these companies attract more users who are willing to generate such content, they are also able to attract third party advertisers to their respective sites. As a result, ‘while no product is sold to the users, the users themselves are sold as a commodity to advertisers’ (Fuchs, 2010: 191; see also Fisher, 2012). Social media users are therefore ‘productive workers’ ripe for exploitation (Fuchs, 2015: 164; Fuchs, 2010: 192). Interestingly, non-Marxist critical theorists have put forward a similar argument. Zwick et al. (2008) argue that co-creation is a mechanism for corporations to encourage experimentation and innovation by and between social media users, which can then be captured by corporations. Social communication between consumers thus generates value for corporations (Zwick et al., 2008: 175).

From an alternative Marxist perspective that we favour, however, there are some problems with these critical theoretical accounts. We can begin to understand some of these difficulties if we briefly explore the nature and meaning of the term, ‘productive labour’. This is a term employed by Fuchs, and he takes it from Marx. In *Capital* and elsewhere, Marx claims that only labour that generates surplus value is productive labour (Marx, 1988: 644; see also Duménil and Lévy, 2011). According to Fuchs, and here he uses a similar categorisation to that developed by Gough (1972), Marx breaks productive labour into three further categories. The first type of productive labour (1) is work that produces use-values. Fuchs argues that this is a limited understanding of productive labour because it is too general and can be applied across history. This leads to the definition of productive labour (2). This refers to a form of individual labour that produces surplus value, commodities, and capital. Under this definition, productive labour not only encompasses wage-labour in a factory, but also includes wage-labour employed in non-factory occupations, such as in distribution. Finally, Fuchs (2015: 138) notes that Marx had a third meaning of productive labour (3), which is productive labour of the collective worker within an organisation and not just individual productive labour (2). Importantly, for Fuchs, productive labour (3) incorporates wage-labour and a whole array of non-wage-labour. Facebook is a case in point, which gains value not only by a variety of individuals directly employed by Facebook, but also by users who freely generate data at the moment of consumption that can then be sold to Facebook’s ad clients (Fuchs, 2015: 164).

Certainly, Fuchs makes a convincing case for seeing social media users as productive labour (3). But let us look more closely at this claim. While it is indeed true to say that for Marx productive labour (3) refers to collective labour, including non-wage-labour, Marx is also clear that at a high level of abstraction any type of labour under capitalism gains its identity because it acts with other productive labour to reproduce the capitalist mode of production *as a whole*. In other words, Marx is interested in how ‘competing labour-powers…together form the entire production machine…’ (Marx, 1988: 1040). These are workers who are ‘exploited by capital and *subordinated* to its process of production and expansion’ (Marx, 1988: 1040). As a result, such labour is productive to the extent that its ‘*combined activity* results materially in an *aggregate* product which is at the same time a *quantity of goods*’ (Marx, 1988: 1040).

One way to understand Marx’s observations on this subject matter is to argue that at his initial level of analysis or abstraction he does not define productive labour by reference to particular individual capitals or to a particular combination of workers within a specific sector or a single organisation such as Facebook. Rather, Marx wishes to understand, first, the abstract and contradictory form of capital as a whole irrespective of how this affects an actual organisation or labour process at any point in time. Marx ‘discovers’ this abstract and contradictory form in the extraction of surplus value from workers. Moseley highlights the importance of this discovery in Marx’s theory.

The reason why Marx’s theory begins with the general form of surplus value is that it is based on the assumption that all the particular forms of surplus value *come from the same source* – the surplus labour of workers. Therefore, the general form of surplus value must be determined first, and then the particular forms, which depends on other factors besides surplus labour, can be determined (Moseley, 2014: 122).

At this level of abstraction, then, productive labour is that which contributes towards *total surplus value*. It enables the capitalist mode of production to reproduce itself and, in turn, contribute towards the *general rate of profit* that can then be distributed to individual capitals (Foley, 1986). Even so, while it is assumed that surplus value is necessary for the operations of any concrete capitalist firm or organisation, it does not follow that an actual concrete firm or organisation itself employs productive labour that creates surplus value (Huws, 2014: 151-156). Indeed, Marx clearly states that much that can be categorised as circulation labour (for instance, accounting, advertising, debt work, insurance, sales, etc.) and supervisory labour (for instance, direct and indirect supervision of workers) is not productive if it does not help to create surplus value (Gough 1972; Moseley 1994).

For example, it is plausible to argue that a company like Facebook generates individual profits within its sector, but does not contribute to the production of surplus value. Facebook mainly operates in the sphere of circulation, not production, so draws on already generated surplus value in the system as a whole and then develops profit-making schemes from it. In other words, Facebook must assume that surplus value has already been produced elsewhere in the global economy (cf. Caffentzis, 2013; Mohun, 2005; Moseley, 1997; Paitaridis and Tsoulfidis, 2012; Smith, 2010). That is to say, Facebook does not engage in ‘real accumulation’, the latter of which, as Lapavitsas (2013: 201-4) notes, develops the means of capitalist production and its related productive labour processes. Two further points can be made here. First, some types of circulation labour and supervisory labour might assist in the creation of surplus value, in which case they would be productive labour. Second, it is perfectly acceptable to agree with Fuchs, and with Zwick et al., that the free labour of prosumers can be exploited labour. We need to be clear, though, that this is not exploitation associated with the generation of surplus value. It is, instead, the exploitation of unproductive free labour in the sphere of circulation through other profitable routes, such as selling ad space to third parties to target the free labour of its users (see also Caraway, 2011; Rigi and Prey, 2015).

In our opinion, therefore, critical theorists like Fuchs are wrong to argue that exploitation, grounded in the extraction of productive surplus value, now reaches into all corners of society through the likes of the digital labour of prosumers. For us, this depiction of capitalism stretches the categories of productive labour and surplus value too thinly across society as a whole (Comor, 2014: 248-254). To draw on Adorno (1990: 159), it is an explanation structured around ‘identity thinking’ and ‘positivity’ in the sense that nearly every type of prosumer and, more generally, every type of activity by users in digital media, is thought to share a positive identification with being surplus value. Even so, we do agree with Fuchs and Zwick et al. that prosumption can and does perform an ideological role that naturalises capitalist social relations in society. We therefore want to suggest that the power of the creative prosumer lies in its distinctiveness as a *fetishistic* category (cf. Comor, 2010). We begin to unpack this argument by first exploring how capitalist production creates ideological desires in people, which are at the same time fetishistic.

**Prosumption-machine**

How might be begin to provide an alternative explanation of prosumption as an ideological category? A good starting point is Marx’s claim that, ‘a definite production determines a definite consumption, distribution and exchange as well as *definite relations between these different moments*’ (Marx, 1993: 99). What this quote immediately suggests is that it is worthwhile, first, to focus on production as the point where one invests their own energy in their own exploitation, which then becomes a moment of consumption. The starting-point is therefore production as a social relation.

One way to understand this specific energy is in how Marx discusses the movement and transformation of capital through different circuits of *industrial capital*. He captures this transformation of energy in the following manner:

*M – C (LP + MP)…P…C¹ – M¹* (Marx 1992: 137).

In this relatively simple formula M represents money capital, which is exchanged for the commodities of labour power (LP) and means of production (MP). Both LP and MP are put to use in the process of production (P) to create commodities (C¹) of more value than was initially laid out in the production process. Transforming an object into commodity capital (C¹) enables a capitalist to sell the commodity for more money than was spent in production, which in turn yields a profit (M¹).

Why, though, is this description of industrial capital so important for Marx in his analysis of capital? An answer can be found in Marx’s observation that through these circuits, capital ‘flourishes, unleashes the whole of its energy…’ (Marx, 1988: 927). Accordingly, and following Marx, Deleuze and Guattari argue that industrial capital seeks to control these flows and their associated desires in order to procure surplus value (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003b: 176-7). For Deleuze and Guattari, desire is productive insofar that it acts as a ‘machine’ by linking together desire to different objects (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003a: 28). Industrial capital thus performs ‘a tighter and tighter control over production’ and brings desire under its abstract and decoded control and regulation. Money and finance are vital to these processes because they ensure that the connections between different circuits of capital remain in a creative flow with one another (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003a: 12; Deleuze and Guattari, 2003b: 176-7). Under these circumstances, desire is transformed into an unacknowledged investment that a person or group already has in capitalism before an interest is consciously pursued (cf. Smith, 2007: 9). The organisation of desire therefore makes the social system of capitalism appear acceptable and normal (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003a: 259). This is akin to Marx’s notion of the fetish. Here, commodity production appears as a natural and eternal process, ‘as a regulative law of nature’, rather than as a social relation of exploitation (Marx, 1988: 168-9).

How might this fetish become a dialectical moment of consumption too? The first point to note here is that this non-representational capitalist force of desire is affectual and virtual. Virtual here is the virtue of becoming, a movement that is actualised at the moment of its representation. For example, Naomi Klein (2010) famously noted that logos are worth more than the material holdings of companies. Today, though, the ‘i’ in objects like ‘iPhone’ is not a logo in the conventional sense in that it is not a company-owned asset. This is why anyone can use it, perhaps to grace products or services with that little piece of Apple magic. The lower case ‘i’ is property held in common. It is only by association with another signifier such as Pod or Pad that it can be trademarked. Meaning is derived through association. In the vernacular of Deleuze and Guattari, the ‘i’ is an affectual desire without object, an excess endlessly captured/territorialised by commodity production and exchange. The symbolic value of ‘i’ can be extrapolated from its numerous associations and usages and travel on a voyage of becomings. It variously signifies cool, sophistication, hi-tech, information, individuality, identity, and more.

If, then, we think of prosumption as the excess of desire, as a non-commodified and thereby non-codified affectual excess or a *virtual becoming*, it is also provided with an object when it is associated with a signifier such as Twitter or iPhone. At the same time, these becomings exceed the bodily form. Constantly updating our profiles on social media sites, expressing our affectual states of becoming about actual anger, loves, joy and hate create a temporary assemblage of affects that ensures order from otherwise chaotic flows of desire (see especially Deleuze and Guattari, 2003b). Thus, the excess of desire translates into excessive consumption, which becomes naturalised and fetishised.

Contemporary financialised capitalism underscores this ideological form because excessive consumption requires finance and debt. Indeed, in *Anti-Oedipus* Deleuze and Guattari suggest that ‘(i)n a sense, it is the bank that controls the whole system and the investment of desire’ in capitalism (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003a: 250). Seen in this way, prosumption, which becomes a symbol under financialised capitalism of cool, cutting edge, informational, being an individual, and so on, is the ‘missing thing’ that digital businesses in particular purport to satisfy and which everyone can buy into. All can potentially profit by being a prosumer, by investing their energies in machinic assemblages by co-creating a page on social media and investing their passions in it, and through financial investments in their own consumer identities (see also Beighton, 2016). Through prosumption, ‘deterritorialised’ flows of desire are captured and territorialised.

It is also true to say that others draw on Deleuze and Guattari to arrive at different conclusions. Ritzer for example claims that prosumers, unlike the waged proletariat, are paid nothing for their labours. Citing Deleuze, Ritzer says this means that ‘from a purely economic perspective, prosumers are exploited within a capitalist system and they are exploited to a greater extent than the proletariat’ (Ritzer 2014: 20; see also Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010: 13). Autonomist writers, such as Berardi (2009), Lazzarato (2012) and Marazzi (2010), also employ Deleuze and Guattari to make similar observations. However, and unlike Ritzer or autonomist writers, we follow Deleuze and Guattari in believing that the circuit of industrial capital still represents the most powerful form of capital in society. The abundance of goods created by this new type of prosumption are not material as such, in the sense of material relations of exploitation, but rather are deterritorialising flows of desire that nonetheless are, especially today, prone to capture, control and naturalisation by industrial capital (Deleuze, 1992; see also Roberts 2014). Unlike those who think that prosumption gives capital new outlets for exploitation and surplus value, we therefore believe that Deleuze and Guattari’s theoretical ideas can be employed, instead, to highlight the *fetishising* becomings, potentials and desires of prosumption that has its origins in production.

Deleuze and Guattari are extremely useful in presenting us with some theoretical tools to ascertain how desire and prosumption are captured in the creative energies of capitalist production. But how might we expand and widen this initial analysis into other societal domains not readily associated with production? For instance, how might we theoretically understand the reproduction of this creative fetish of prosumption into other areas of society? The next section draws on Adorno in this respect, in particular his ideas on consumer activity through a D.I.Y culture, in order to comprehend the movement of prosumption through society.

**The do-it-yourself syndrome**

The concept of the culture industry, introduced by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their 1944 book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1997), explains why people under conditions of servitude identify with interests to which, logic tells us, they ought to be opposed. ‘Mass culture’, a term popular among theorists of the 1930s, was tied to a moralistic critique of what was presupposed to be an authentic expression of the working classes. Adorno and Horkheimer, however, employed the term culture industry to convey the point that culture is produced *for* mass consumption rather than being an expression of the masses. The focus of the two theorists is thus the commodification of the aesthetic sphere and the broader implications of that commodification for individual and society. By fixing their gaze on the processes and relations of cultural production, they were able to unmask its nature and show that it is not popular culture specifically that is subject to the laws of exchange, but the aesthetic sphere in general, with factory-style methods ironing out the imperfections of artistic style. It is largely irrelevant, therefore, whether the consumer is taken in or, in other words, ‘duped’ by the culture industry – they want what they know to be superficial because the choices are so limited and are relief from the seriousness of daily life (Adorno, 2001).

Giving the example of music, although the critique can be made of any mass produced cultural artefact, the more familiar the continuous refrain of a song, the more the listener identifies in it what they understand by and come to expect from music, the greater is its commercial value and the more it is reproduced for an ever-expanding market. The act of listening, Adorno (2001) said, becomes regressive and the listener inattentive. This also holds for classical music. Adorno gives the example of commuters merrily whistling a passage of a symphony as they make their way to work. Here the listener finds pleasure in the reified and substitutable part standing in for the whole and is deceived into thinking that music can be evaluated as easily as one might evaluate the price of a dozen eggs, without the need for further research or reflection. Satisfaction lies in recognition, that moment when, for example, the listener says ‘I got it, that’s Schubert!’ They are ‘hooked on classics’. In this way, exchange-value becomes the objective and fetishised criterion by which the worth of something is determined. Fetishisation therefore mystifies the social relations without which the thing could not exist. By recognising herself in the minuscule differences factored into cultural production – that a mass produced T-shirt has a slighter greyer colour than another T-shirt on the shop floor – the consumer becomes a pseudo-individual akin to the object of exchange and, like the commodity, drained of anything more substantive (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997).

The point about pseudo-individualisation is crucial to prosumption. The cultural and prosumer product must regularly be differentiated in order to maintain demand. Whether in product development or marketing, this requires constant innovation and investment by the firm. This point can be expanded once we connect it to Adorno and Horkheimer’s dialectical point that the more homogenised culture as a result of the processes they describe, bound as they are to the circulation and expansion of capital around the world, the more it is diversified. But diversification is market-driven and inherently superficial. Like the hundreds of available channels on television, the vast amount of information now available and the choices this engenders has, arguably, led to a further dilution of culture and further differentiated standardisation. By Adorno’s reckoning, cultural diversification would be a by-product of standardisation, reflecting the need to individualise artefacts in order to maintain sales.

In view of the claims made above, the consumer increasingly does the job of individualising the product on behalf of the company. The culture industry markets this possibility, leaving the product ontologically open for the subject to differentiate, thereby removing the cost and risk of manufacturing increasingly differentiated products to people who may not want them. The purpose and methods deployed by the consumer with the power, as Firat and Venkatesh (1995: 260) suggest, ‘to seduce and signify, create her/his own simulations to articulate his/her own visions of life’ is important here. Today, the problem of ‘co-creation’, then, is whether the subject really does create meaningful products during their free time. Adorno even anticipates this. In a short essay on free time, he describes a ‘do-it-yourself syndrome’ by which people are spuriously and illusory distracted. They are ‘institutionalised vicarious satisfactions’ enabling those dimly suspicious ‘of how hard it would be to throw off the yoke that weighs upon them’ to avoid facing this reality. ‘Productive free time’, Adorno writes, ‘is only possible for people who have outgrown their tutelage, not for those who under conditions of heteronomy, have become heteronomous for themselves’ (Adorno, 2001c: 194). What Adorno demonstrates is that the DIY syndrome increasing in scope and magnitude with social media represents an ‘oasis of unmediated life within a completely mediated total system’ (Adorno, 2001: 189). The DIY novelty of new technology and online media can itself be considered a form of pseudo-individualisation, the appeal deriving in part from a loss of independence from capital and meaningful determination of our lives.

Adorno of course has been extensively criticised for painting a somewhat bleak picture of consumer culture. While we do not buy into this negative picture of Adorno’s writings (see also the convincing defence of Adorno by Cook 2004), we do nevertheless wish to come back to Deleuze and Guattari’s crucial point that the fetish has a creative edge to it. It never simply deadens desire but also opens up and unleashes new creative desires that often escape capture. Adorno is certainly aware of these potentials of desire, but arguably, it is with Herbert Marcuse that we discover a more fully formed theoretical account of the relationship between desire and consumption in society.

**Desire to overcome the prosumer fetish**

As is well-known, Marcuse took a great deal from Freud, but he was also critical of some of Freud’s ideas and indeed sought to bring Freud together with Marx to produce what is still a powerful critique of the capitalist form of consumption and the individualism it promotes. The fundamental premise of psychoanalytic theory is that humans are motivated by a desire for libidinal satisfaction or pleasure rather than need as such. Culture, for Freud (1994), defends against the destructive drive of the human animal, inhibiting it towards activities such as work deemed socially useful within that socio-historical moment. In such ways pleasure is mediated by a desire to avoid unpleasure and hence, unlike the death drive, is in such circumstances socially conserving. Cooperation is the means by which a condition of scarcity is overcome and civilisations develop. Therein, in perpetuity, and with greater intensity as societies become more complex, pleasure is sacrificed in the interests of civilisation, thus the subject doomed to discontentment.

While Marcuse recognised that a certain amount of repression was necessary to prevent chaos, and thereby for society to function, he took issue with the obvious implication of Freud’s argument that repression is socially functional rather than, as is increasingly the case, a function of capitalist circulation and expansion. As the technological means of production developed there were fewer reasons for people to direct so much of their energies to labour, and so as Marcuse argued:

The excuse of scarcity, which has justified institutionalised repression since its inception, weakens as man’s knowledge and control over nature enhances the means for fulfilling human needs with a minimum of toil (Marcuse, 2006: 92).

In a society oriented to consumption, consumer products become substitute objects of desire, which delivers only a fleeting and superficial satisfaction also binding libido to the capitalist system and alienated pleasures. For Freud the object of sublimated drives are productive activities such as work, artistic endeavour and intellectual development. The pleasures obtained in intellectual endeavour, for example, are derived overtime from sustained libidinal investments. However, in consumer societies, Marcuse argues, the object towards which libido is sublimated is increasingly consumption itself which can be obtained without effort or delay. The superego that once censored the subject for their desires is now self-censoring. In the form of consumer products, it permits a *de*sublimated instantaneous, though superficial, pleasure. Marcuse (2002) calls this *repressive* desublimation. It is repressive in the sense that it binds us ever more to commodity production, and is further alienating both in respect to the superficiality of the pleasures obtained and that they can only be obtained through waged labour.

A variation on this is propounded by Slavoj Žižek through his reading of Lacan. A principal difference between Freud and Lacan centres on the latter’s claim that ‘the unconscious itself has in the end no other structure than the structure of a language’ (Lacan, 1992: 32). Language not only enables us to make sense of the world at the conscious level, it is constitutive of a subject’s entire relation to it. Yet, as Lacan also notes borrowing from Saussure, language is never equivalent to the object it describes but is only ever an approximation of its object of reference. Similarly, the object of desire is never actually obtained because whatever it is that is desired is never actually it – there is a lack to desire. Indeed, lack is fundamental to human subjectivity without which there is no motive. Therefore, what we actually desire is desire itself. The object of desire, or *objet (petit) a*, is subsequently both an empty placeholder and also filled with imaginary substance which derives from the symbolic order that lies outside the self. And as the early Frankfurt School theorists understood, desire wants what is produced for mass consumption.

Žižek (2007) observes this relationship at work in the correspondence between subjective drive and the creation of surplus-value, along with thesurplus-enjoymentsor *jouissance* that arises between both. As Žižek explains (2006: 62), drive is attached to a missing object and as such strives for what exceeds mere life. Capital, similarly, strives to exceed value and can never obtain enough of it (the surplus). In a comparable manner to Marcuse’s notion of repressive desublimation, Žižek argues that in societies predicated on mass consumption the superego demands that we enjoy ourselves. The commodity becomes the medium through which enjoyments are superficially obtained and which thereby fuel the circulation and expansion of capital. At the same time, any guilt felt by engaging in excessive consumption can be atoned for in products advertised as beneficial to the environment and work practices. So, for example, the consumer who purchases goods on amazon.com can also buy into amazon’s proclamation that it follows ethical business practices. Guilt is itself fetishised as a commodity to be purchased and gotten rid of (Cremin 2015). The effect is the displacement and depoliticisation of capitalism’s destructive drive (Žižek, 2008).

Marcuse makes the observation that ‘…the so-called consumer economy and the politics of corporate capitalism have created a second nature of man which ties him libidinally and aggressively to the commodity form’ (Marcuse, 1969: 11). If drive itself is integral to what it means to be human, it follows that the problem is not that we desire but the object to which our desires are attached. Žižek would not disagree with Marcuse’s sentiments here. Nonetheless, he adds:

Our ultimate choice is directly the one between two death drives: the only way to get rid of the stupid superego death drive of enjoyment is to embrace the death drive in its disruptive dimension of traversing the fantasy. One can beat the death drive only by the death drive itself – so, again, the ultimate choice is between bad and worse (Žižek, 2000: 390).

Foster (2007: 726) says that ‘consumer agency is a source of disruption, of unruly overflowings that escape capture and can even destroy value – notably, the value of brands, favourite targets of no logo-style corporate “anti-globalization” activists’. Žižek would likely respond that, as with so-called ethical consumption, activities such as these do not necessarily threaten capital and such apparent contradictions can easily be absorbed by capital and innovation.

It is at this point, however, that Marcuse arguably presents us with a more hopeful picture. His optimism lies in the technological developments that under common control can be utilised to minimise alienated labour thereby enabling the expansion of the realm of non-alienated pleasures, a self-sublimated human sensuality or Eros not to be confused with the superficial enjoyments of mass consumption (Marcuse, 2006). The Internet via social media is one such technology that can have disruptive effects on capital by serving more direct socialist political purposes: blog-pieces that expose industrial malpractices, Facebook sites that promote impromptu ‘teach-ins’ for leftist causes, and so forth. Naturally, digital technology can also serve more insidiously the agendas of white supremacists in respect to the so-called ‘alt-right’. All of these examples highlight the dialectical nature of digital technology, and the activity of the social media user/producer cannot be apprehended without consideration of these broader dialectical forces and social relations. After all, capitalism and the subject are both ‘open-ended’ in their natures and perpetually changing. Thus the relationship of desire to commodities and politics itself is never entirely determined or foreclosed. What Frederic Jameson terms as a ‘Marxist negative hermeneutic’ is worth recalling here. It ‘must in the practical work of reading and interpretation be exercised *simultaneously* with a Marxist positive hermeneutic, or decipherment...’ (Jameson, 2002: 286). The open-ended nature of the many products today signal or at least invite possibilities to overcome fetishism. And it is here that we return to Deleuze and Guattari. They are also clear that the excess of desire unleashed by capitalism can also produce innovative assemblages and patterns that seep out beyond the grip of capital (Deleuze, and Guattari, 2003b: 257).

**Conclusion**

Marx argues that capitalism produces a peculiar dualist way of seeing the world, which, at the same time, reproduces the fetish spoken about throughout our article. At a basic and relatively simple level of circulation, observes Marx, capitalism ushers in a system in which individual and private labour interacts through a dualistic relationship of *abstract* social relations (the socially necessary labour time taken to produce commodities) and *concrete* ‘things’ (actual commodities). This basic dualism leads to a fetish because ‘social relations…do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material (*dinglich*) relations between persons and social relations between things’ (Marx 1988: 165-6). Marx further believes that this real dualism provides a basis for the creation of unhelpful dualist theories and representations of the world.

We can begin to understand Marx’s observations here in relation to some arguments put forward about prosumption. Arvidsson and Colleoni, for instance, suggest that ‘factory discipline’ found in industrial societies is no longer the main source of profit in capitalism. More important and dynamic sources of profit emerge through intangible factors, such as ‘common knowledge, symbols, relations, and competences…’ and ‘technical innovation, as in the case of open source software… reputation and attention, as in the case of the online audience’ (Arvidsson and Colleoni, 2012: 140). Here, prosumers become a crucial site in which brands gain value through the likes of affective investments by users and word-of-mouth discussions on chat forums. In seeking to map out what is unique about the creative economy, Hartley (2004) similarly compares ‘modernist’ categories, such as the public sphere, print literacy, the nation state, government(ality), empiricism, criticism, realism, the public’ to contemporary cultural categories more attuned to understanding the creative, digital and prosumer economy, such as consumption, the reader or audience, postmodernism, private life, the self, the ‘plenitude of the possible’ analysis by plebiscite, universal education, redaction, ‘reality’, the DIY citizen’ (Hartley, 2004: 140). In both Arvidsson and Colleoni’s and Hartley’s respective articles, then, an old-fashioned ‘industrial’ and ‘modernist’ world is compared and contrasted with a newer, high-tech creative information economy and society.

However, and as we have argued in the paper, such observations are misguided theoretically, if for no other reason than that they overstate the difference between industrial capital and financial and commercial capital as well as digital culture. In fact, they reproduce a dualist way of representing the world, which is often unhelpful. Indeed, as Deleuze and Guattari note, the principle mechanism by which ‘capital becomes the full body’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003a: 247), and engages in self-valorisation, is the point at which industrial capital comes into being. For Deleuze and Guattari, therefore, financial capital and technological advancement is dependent on productive, industrial capital (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003a: 247). Financial capital and technology is *a moment* in the circuit of industrial capital. Adorno and Horkheimer take this theoretical claim further into society, while Marcuse highlights the possibilities of disruption by consumers. In recent times, however, finance and information have managed to assert themselves as the dominant moment within this circuit, and this movement is one of the new characteristics of global capitalism. Even so, it still makes no analytical sense to divide industrial capital and financial capital off from one another, as theorists of prosumption sometimes do.

We believe that all three set of authors in their own ways have developed and adapted Marx’s insights on capitalist production, circulation and exchange. For us, these insights continue to be of explanatory value on questions of cultural production and the meanings the individual derives from it. From this critical viewpoint, we therefore need, theoretically, to move beyond the appearance of social life as being part of a new creative prosumer realm found in the images in brands, commercials, management speak, government spin, and so on. The 2008 global crisis should have shattered these images, based as it was in the ‘old fashioned’ materiality of over-accumulation. Once this much is recognised then we need to place the rise of digital and creative prosumers within ‘normal’ forms of capitalist consumption and its accompanying ideology.

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