

Marxist interpretations of consumption and materiality - strengths and weaknesses

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Consumption and the body have become topics of great interest in academia as well as in popular culture. Writing from a historical materialist perspective, I was intrigued by this, but also dissatisfied with the standard Marxissant view that such topics are trivial, self-indulgent, or, worse still, a concession to false ideology. Instead, I wanted to see whether Marxism could help explain the turn towards consumption and the body as a historical phenomenon rooted in particular economic conditions.

Looking at body studies first, I noticed that recent contributions usually posit either a constructed or a physicalist body, neither of which is generally considered to be much involved in the production of material objects. This unproductive body, I suggested in a 2007 essay (<http://reconstruction.eserver.org/074/cerni.shtml>), corresponds to the real experience of an economy where only a small portion of the workforce is employed in productive industries. At the same time, however, this body requires those very industries to operate in certain ways - increasingly, by outsourcing highly productive work to impoverished 'others' in developing nations. In Western societies, the result is an extreme separation between people and things, between mind and matter, and between constructionist and physicalist interpretations of the body.

Next I considered how, under the same economic conditions, the commodity is transformed into a one-sided object of consumption, a pure use-value. The main features of this object, I argue in a more recent essay (<http://clogic.eserver.org/2007/Cerni.pdf>), are physical singularity, personal meaningfulness and practical multiplicity. These features are neither naturally embodied in the object nor ideologically constructed; rather, they arise out of the consuming relation between subject and object. The ideology of consumer capitalism - built around notions of desire, meaning-making and choice - is therefore not false, but fitting to the real unproductive subject, to the consumer. Its counterpart is a one-sided objectivism that draws our attention to 'the things themselves', so that 'the materiality of a there-to-be-consumed world is perfectly aligned with the malleable performances of post-modern reflexivity'. The essay ends with a few speculative thoughts on the future of consumer capitalism.

I am now wondering how the global downturn might affect the consuming experience. With credit more difficult to obtain, emptier shopping malls, heavy discounting, and a growing reliance on second-hand goods and charitable donations - will attitudes towards buying and using change? A widely-read story here in the US during the recent holiday season concerned the horrific death of a Walmart employee trampled to death by bargain-hunters (http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2008-11-28-walmart-death_N.htm)