

Individual Consumption in Capitalism. An Exercise in the Logic of Capital*

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This is a systematic analysis of the apparent contradictions of private consumption – growing discrepancy between productive potential and actual needs, the degenerating quality of consumption and so on – within the frame of Marx's critique of political economy. Similar analyses of other material and social areas of everyday life such as ideology, technology, forms of consciousness, etc. are referred to as a 'subsumptive approach'.

By this is meant a theoretical standpoint that sees the capitalist social form as the subsumptive agent that renders the fundamental social determinants to every sphere of social life. An exercise is undertaken in order to see what the formal social determinants of consumption are in the capitalist mode of production. For this reason the determinants of consumption are analysed in the reproductive circuit of individual capital. The implications and limitations of this analysis are discussed with respect to problems relating to the theoretical stipulations of the subsumption approach and the empirical study of the apparent contradictions of consumption.

Introduction

The growth of developed capitalist economies in the 'reconstruction period' after World War II has made possible an unforeseen expansion in the volume of consumption by private households. At the same time private spending has diversified and the emphasis has shifted towards services and leisure: private cars, entertainment, travel, alcoholic beverages and the like.

This development is not always favourably interpreted. In fact, the terms consumer society and mass consumption society are usually applied in an adverse-

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ly critical sense: technological progress and expansion of the volume of consumption have not meant problemless emancipation from the anguish of scarcity. Criticism of the mass consumption society has pointed to many problems that seem to follow when the volume of consumption is increased and the process of production becomes a matter of decreasing concern. The *kind* of consumption is not necessarily optimal as regards satisfaction of needs, and human capacities are employed worthlessly. This point is often made by the zero-growth movement, which claims that since needs for physical comfort are virtually satisfied, a civilized society could be expected to develop its intellectual and aesthetic qualities. Instead, great masses of people are content with the platitudes of commercial entertainment, gadgetry, and even harmful patterns of consumption such as excessive smoking, drinking and eating. The increased leisure is devoted to consumption, waste and prodigality – with spending money for commodities rather than to a real enjoyment of the freedom that it would allow.

Criticism of mass consumption society, especially in America, is often associated with an underconsumption theory, understood as a quantitative contradiction between production and consumption: consumption must be artificially stimulated in order to preserve full employment of the excessively efficient means of production. This naive underconsumption theory was, for example, adopted by Baran & Sweezy in their *Monopoly Capital* (1966), in which they concluded that the ability of monopolies to raise prices higher than costs plus normal profit results in a surplus that must be artificially realized in military industry and squander.

In the literature on state monopoly capitalism these problems are attributed to the general crisis of the capitalist system, where production creates ever growing needs but on the other hand the crisis-ridden economy does not allow them to be satisfied (Mehnert 1973; Der staatsmonopolistische Kapitalismus 1972:276–280; Proletariat in der BRD 1974:127–128).

My purpose in this article is to explore certain possibilities for a systematic analysis of these problems within the frame of Marx's critique of political economy understood as his theory of the capitalist mode of production.

What is consumption?

It is not a simple matter to define private or individual consumption. For example, consumption by households is calculated in national accounts as the sum of money spent. In marketing studies consumption is defined as consumer's behaviour in the market place. For sociological research these starting points are too narrow. Consumption is not only spending, it is also the enjoyment of the commodities and services purchased. This is the *purpose* of spending, seen from the individual standpoint. The purpose of spending determines *what* shall be consumed and demanded.

In a wide sociological sense consumption cannot, then, be identified with simple buying. Buying – or spending money – is only one moment in the whole process. It,

however, is a necessary moment – in capitalist society the objects of consumption are mainly obtained through the market – which must influence the volume, kind and quality of consumption.

Furthermore, consumption for the satisfaction of human needs is an integrated part of the workings of the entire economic system. It depends not only on the market forces but is also notably dependent on technology and production as well as on the distribution of incomes. Marx has given a fascinating dialectical exposition of the totality of production, consumption, distribution and exchange in his famous 'Einleitung' (Marx 1973). His starting point is that these are necessary moments of one single but complex process of man's exchange with nature. Each of these moments is mutually implied by the others. There could be no consumption without production, of course. This is also true in a qualitative sense:

Hunger is hunger; but hunger that is satiated with cooked meat and eaten with a knife and fork is another hunger than that which is extinguished by devouring raw meat with the help of hands, nails and teeth. Not only the object of consumption but also the way of consumption is produced in production, not only objectively but also subjectively. Production creates also the consumers (Marx 1973:92).

On the other hand, production implies consumption. Production is production only in so far as it is designed to meet the needs of human consumption and to satisfy human needs. Furthermore, it is possible only on condition that the producers' capacity to work is reproduced in consumption.

Similarly, the distribution of social products and the exchange transactions that lead to the allocation of these products according to need, are involved. The process of material reproduction or material exchange ('metabolism') between man and nature is objectively and subjectively, quantitatively and qualitatively, one complete complex whole.

This materialist standpoint alone is necessary but inadequate as a basis for the analysis of consumption problems in modern capitalist society. It was not Marx's intention to develop a theory of consumption or of man's material exchange with nature. His task was to expose the specific social form in which this exchange takes place in capitalism. Therefore he did not start from consumption, production or needs but from their intersection in the cell form of capitalist society, the commodity form in which wealth appears in capitalism. 'Capital' is no theory of consumption or of the satisfaction of needs as such. It is, rather, a theory of the total social form in which the metabolism between man and nature takes place in the specific and particular capitalist mode of production.

This makes it necessary to explore to what extent and in what manner the apparent contradictions of consumption – increasing capacity to satisfy need coexisting with a degenerating quality of consumption and widening gap between needs and their satisfaction – are related to this particular social form.

Social and material forms

In a theoretical sense we are dealing here with a problem that is more general than that of consumption and need satisfaction or welfare as such. If Marx's critique of political economy is recognized as *the* theory of the capitalist mode of production and if the logic of this theory is seen as the true reflection of the essence (Wesen) of capitalist social relations, what is the connection between the essence-categories of the theory to the apparent phenomena of everyday social life – including consumption – in capitalist societies?

This theme, the structure of capitalism as a specific mode of production with its own 'logic' embracing all levels of social relations, is present in many recent studies that have a background in the so-called 'Hegeian' interpretation of Marx's 'Capital' (see Andersen 1975).

H.-J. Schanz (1974) and H. J. Thomsen (1976) of Denmark have written on the fundamental theoretical aspects of this subsumption approach. For Schanz, the logic of Marx's critique of political economy is the logic of the *capital-form*. He emphasizes, first, that this logic is historically specific and limited to the capitalist mode of production; and secondly, that this logic does not immediately cover *everything* in bourgeois society. Schanz distinguishes two spheres in bourgeois societies. The first is the 'explicit circulatory cycle of production and reproduction of capital' (det eksplicite kapital-cirkulankredsløb) which 'expresses the pure totality of political economy' (udtrykker . . . den politøkonomisk rene totalitet). The second sphere consists of the material, ideological and political forms in which the reproduction of the capitalist-bourgeois form of society takes place. For Schanz, the problem is to establish the 'subsumptive forms of intervention' between the two spheres, i.e. to show how the capitalist form subsumes the social spheres that do not lie immediately within the reproductive logic of capital itself (pp. 182–187).

Thomsen, on the other hand, emphasizes the double logic of the capitalist system. The 'transcendental' (in a sense unclear to me) sphere of 'das Kapital im allgemeinen' dominates the material of substantive basis, which consists of consciousness, technology, material consumption and the like. These spheres interact, which can be seen as 'the civilizing influence of capital', for example.

Commodity aesthetics as capitalist subsumption

The Danish programmes of capital-logic are theoretically diffuse and tend to cover a very wide range of issues such as ideology, socialization, technology and so on, and also many fundamental philosophical problems. Nevertheless they indicate, on a very general level, the problems that arise when the material forms of consumption are related to the subordinating capitalist social form.

A more specific analysis of such contradictions within a very similar frame of reference is Wolfgang Fritz Haug's theory of 'commodity aesthetics' (Haug 1971). Haug's starting point is the dual nature of commodities and the contradictions of

the exchange process. In a developed commodity economy the exchange value acquires independence in the form of money, in which form it can circulate and accumulate free of any specific use value. Money becomes the delusive goal of the whole economic process. Therefore, the use value of a seller's commodity and the need for this commodity felt by another person become merely a means towards the goal of acquiring money through the sale (p. 15). For the seller (for example a capitalist) the use value of commodities is important only in so far as it is a necessary attraction to the buyer. However, the real use value is realized only *after* the transaction: before the buyer is offered only an imaginary promise of the usefulness of the object which he desires. This is why the aesthetics of commodities (design, packing, etc.) have an important function as a servant of realization. The imaginary use value – 'Schein' – becomes more important than the real one – 'Sein'. As the contradictions of capitalism grow in intensity and as the problem of realization of commodity capital becomes ever more serious, the Schein will become increasingly divorced from the Sein.

The standpoint of capital, the only aim of which is to increase its own value, usurps all human efforts, desires, wants and wishes and makes these mere motivations by which people can be trapped, and which are the object of a research that employs a whole branch of social science. This standpoint of increasing the value of capital contradicts everything that people in themselves are and want. That which connects people with capital can only be imaginary (p. 57).

Although this analysis of the functions of commodity aesthetics is interesting and his interpretation of advertising as mass production of imaginary use values has at least aesthetic merit, it has certain weaknesses that may be of general significance. First, the distinction between real and imaginary use values gives no grounds for identification of the two. This distinction is in danger of being no more than a moral judgement. Secondly, a more theoretical weakness in Haug's critique of commodity aesthetics is the shortcut taken from the dialectics of the commodity form directly to the problems of the present day consumer, trapped in the 'commodity hell' of a supermarket. True, the importance of monopolies and of capitalist mass production are observed, but the theoretical place of consumption and marketing in the totality of the capitalist form of material reproduction is not defined. The importance and functions of commodity aesthetics can hardly be understood as the formal imperatives of realization alone.

The determinants of private consumption in the reproductive circuit of capital

In order to test the usefulness of the subsumption approach in studying the contradictions apparent in private consumption, let us systematically see how the consumption process is constituted in the totality of capitalist reproduction. To do this we shall 'dissect' Marx's presentation of the capital relationship in order to

expose the essential determinants of consumption that are rendered to it by the capitalist social form.

It is best to start, for this purpose, from the presentation of capital in its circulating reproductive form: money is exchanged for commodities to acquire more money. This presentation is used by Marx in the Second Book of 'Capital'. It is useful here because it reveals all the moments in the material reproduction of man – consumption, production, distribution and exchange – in relation to their functions in the reproduction of capital.

An essential feature of capital is that it exists both logically and historically in the form of money before it can act as capital, i.e. increase its value. The working class is separated from the means of production, which are in the hands of the capitalist class. The function of money-capital is to combine the labour power of workers and the means of production. The first step of capitalist reproduction thus takes place not in the production process but on the market: the labour market on the one hand and the commodity market (for means of production) on the other hand. This step can be described as $M - C \begin{matrix} \nearrow l \\ \searrow mp \end{matrix}$ meaning: money (M) is exchanged for commodities (C), namely labour power (l) and means of production (mp).

The second step is to set the combined elements of production to work in the production process. This step is not one of 'commodity metamorphosis', i.e. no *exchange* takes place here. Therefore this step is symbolized as $(. . .)$ instead of $(-)$, which signifies an exchange transaction.

Next, new commodities are produced. The value of the capital increases in the production process as the value of consumed means of production is transmitted to new commodities; the value of the labour power is reproduced and a surplus value is added to it. The resultant stock of products, thus, represents the original capital (C) plus the surplus value (c) in a *new* material form: as commodities having different use values from the ingredients of the production process. These new commodities which we can denote with C' must then be sold for money, representing the original capital, M , plus the surplus value, m , before the process can start again. The finishing step is a transaction, $C' - M' (= M + m)$. The whole series of steps is as follows (Marx 1970b:41).

$$M - C \begin{matrix} \nearrow l \\ \searrow mp \end{matrix} \dots P \dots C' (= C + c) - M' (= M + m)$$

In this simple formula production and consumption are seen as functions of capital: the surplus value is created in production and it is realized in consumption. Let us systematically see how consumption is involved. Here it is simpler to assume that the produced commodities are consumer goods.

1. Individual consumption falls outside the reproductive circuit of capital. Marx describes consumption in terms of what he calls 'simple circulation', where commodities are exchanged for money in order to buy other commodities. Every consumer in a developed commodity economy must sell something he owns before

he can obtain commodities from the market to satisfy his own needs. In capitalism workers sell their labour power and capitalists sell their commodity stocks in order to buy consumable use values. The total consumption process can thus be described as $C-M-C$. This chain is not included in the reproductive circuit of capital as described above, although both of the two transactions appear in the formula *disconnected* of each other. The first transaction in the consumption process (sale) appears at two points in the formula: (a) in the beginning when workers sell their labour power in order to acquire money for the purchase of food, housing, clothing, etc. and (b) at the end of the formula where the capitalist sells his commodity stock.

The second transaction, namely the purchase of commodities by workers and capitalists, is only *implicitly* apparent in the reproduction of capital. If the products of the individual capitalist are consumables, their realization is, at the same time, a prelude to their consumption. On the other hand, the reproduction formula also implies that the workers spend their wages on necessities needed to restore their working capacity, to provide for their families etc.

In sum, the consumption process is *initiated* by the reproductive circuit of capital in the sense that it generates incomes. But the consumption process itself falls outside the reproductive circuit of capital, being only its necessary precondition. This precondition manifests itself in two ways: (a) In consumption the labour power is reproduced; (b) the consumable products of capital are realized. No capitalist has the power to regulate directly the consumption of his workers, nor is he interested in so doing.

The maintenance and reproduction of the working class is, and must ever be, the necessary condition to the reproduction of capital. But the capitalist may safely leave its fulfillment to the labourer's instincts of self-preservation and of propagation. All the capitalist cares for, is to reduce the labourers' individual consumption as far as possible to what is strictly necessary, and he is far away from imitating those brutal South Americans, who force their labourers to take the more substantial, rather than the less substantial, kind of food (Marx 1970:572-573).

Therefore it is not in the power or in the interests of the masters of industry to control directly what is consumed and produced. Their only concern in this respect is the marketability of the total annual produce of their capital. It is in this indirect way that the usability (use value) of their products becomes the regulator of production through the play of the market.

2. Capitalist production is not aimed at consumption but rather at profit. This is one of the many ways in which the basic contradiction of the capitalist mode of production can be expressed. At the same time it is one that has immediately specific bearing on individual consumption. The productive activities of man, in substance the central moment in the 'metabolism' between man and nature, are subsumed under the driving force of the system: increasing the value of capital in the form of money (profits). It would therefore be fruitless to search for explanations to the distortions in the kinds of produced consumables in the interests of the

capitalists or the capitalist class, as is sometimes done in interpretations of manipulation and marketing. Advertising and marketing are not directed by their practitioners' desire to stimulate certain kinds of consumption for their own sake, although the ideological aspect of 'conspicuous' consumption, etc. may be indirectly advantageous to the capitalist class as a whole.

3. Consumption in capitalist conditions is mediated by money. Before any commodity 'receives its finish in consumption', it must not only be produced but also bought and sold for money. Theoretically, this means that the amount and to some extent the kind of consumption depends on the quantity, kind and distribution of incomes that are circulating in the economy. Revenues (incomes) are therefore the limit that the capitalist accumulation process sets on consumption.

4. The most important distinction between incomes is that relating to their sources: whether they are derived from variable capital in the form of wages, or whether they are based on surplus value appearing in one or another of its forms: profit, interest, land-rent, etc. In the first case above, consumption is determined with regard to its material qualities by the necessity for labour to maintain itself in a working condition. The consumption mediated by the flow of surplus-revenues is not similarly restricted and is therefore defined by Marx as luxury, i.e. reproduction of the exploiting classes.

The distinction between necessary and luxury consumption is only in a formal sense clear. Regardless of its origin, money can buy whatever is for sale on the market. Therefore at times the working class may also engage in what normally is considered luxury consumption and historically the distinction may and does change. This makes it possible for the consumption process to serve as an ideological apparatus. To some extent, similar consumption patterns may be adopted by the different segments of the bourgeoisie and by the working class. The post-war boom in durable household accessories has reached most of the working classes in developed capitalist countries and these commodities have largely lost their character as luxury items. This means that consumption patterns are not a very clear indicator of social position and ideologists of the mass consumption society school have hastened to use this as an argument when defining developed capitalist societies as classless.

5. Consumption is a reduction of capital. All invested capital appears in the form of costs irrespective of the uses to which it is put. In this respect investment in the real source of surplus value, i.e. in labour power, is no different for the capitalist from money spent on machines, raw materials, or even book-keeping and other non-productive operations. The revenues to the labouring class will therefore be squeezed to the minimum in order to appropriate the maximum share of the worker's daily output in the form of surplus value. To the capitalist, workers' consumption appears as an unnecessary 'abuse' (Marx 1970a:572). This is another way of expressing the basic contradiction of the capitalist mode of production: consumption, which is the 'true' or 'authentic' aim of production in the metabolism between man and nature, appears as a negative limit to the accumulation of the production of capital.

Not only is the consumption fund of *workers* a cost to the capitalist but also the capitalist's own spending is a reduction from the amount of surplus value that could be accumulated. The total amount of appropriated surplus value is divided between *revenue* for capitalists and *capital*. The larger the first, the smaller the second. The capitalist is compelled by the external coercive laws of competition to constantly expand his capital. Therefore 'his own private consumption is a robbery perpetrated on accumulation, just as in double-entry book-keeping, the private expenditure of the capitalist is placed on the debit side of his accounts against his capital' (Marx 1970a:592). Within the progress of capitalist production, however, the 'original sin' of prodigality finds willing practitioners among capitalists. In fact 'when a certain stage of development has been reached, a conventional degree of prodigality, which is also an exhibition of wealth, and consequently a source of credit, becomes a business necessity to the "unfortunate" capitalist. Luxury enters into capital's expenses of representation' (Marx 1970a:594).

6. Consumption is realization of capital. It was inferred earlier that consumption is a precondition for the reproductive circuit of capital, in the sense that it reproduces the working and capitalist classes. It is also necessary in another sense, namely as the realization of capital existing in the form of consumable commodities. The process of increasing the value of capital in production can continue only on condition that the products are sold. They are, on the other hand, sold only to the extent that these commodities, in the hands of consumers, have deteriorated, i.e. lost their use value, and this create a need for new commodities to replace them. The continuous destruction of products of capital is a necessary precondition for the continuous production of surplus value. Consumption is necessary for capital *both* as a moment of material reproduction of the social classes *and* as material destruction of the products of capital.

7. The 'natural necessity' of allocating production proportionally according to social needs is indirectly guided by market relations (profits and prices). These are determined by the amount and distribution of the total social surplus value, competition and the labour time necessary for the production of the required commodities. Since prices are *determined by* demand but also set *limits to* demand, there is no automatically balanced structure of use values in consumption.

Implications

This dissection of the presentation of capital reproduction could be done with greater precision and completeness. It is perhaps possible to complete it by using other points of departure in the presentation of 'Capital'. However, this is a matter of degree and as such irrelevant to our purpose because this preliminary sketch already allows us to judge on the merits and the limitations of the subsumptive approach.

Nevertheless, one particular incompleteness of this sketch should be observed before considering its implications. The exercise is based on the reproductive circuit of *individual* capital, whereas the quantitative problems relating to the

underconsumption controversy presuppose the concept of total social capital. This controversy has ranged from the early Russian Narodniks all the way through Lenin, Luxemburg, the Austromarxists and Bukharin up to Baran and Sweezy (Bleaney 1976; Rosdolsky 1974). It is relevant here because it is based on Marx's division of the value components of the total social capital into two departments according to the material forms or use values of the total social product: means of consumption and means of production. As is well known, the controversy concerns the tendency for a surplus to be created in the department of consumer goods. The capitalist form of production thus directly influences the material forms and use values of production. Regardless of its relevance, this controversy is however too complicated to be treated here.

Even this simple presentation, without a consideration of these quantitative aspects gives grounds for a number of general comments. In its light it is easy to see why consumption is indeed a separate private sphere (Ottomeyer 1976, 1977), why consumption can be an ideological apparatus, why luxury consumption is not empirically discernible from necessary consumption and why capitalist production only intermittently corresponds to the needs of the population.

Furthermore, the analysis of consumption in the reproductive circuit of capital clarifies how and in what sense consumption as part of the material reproduction of man is subordinated to the monetary reproduction of capital. It shows how use value and need satisfaction are, from the perspective of capital, only a precondition of the economic process and not its aim. (a) Consumption of use values is necessary to reproduce labour power and (b) the usefulness of commodity capital is a precondition for its realization. (c) Finally, it is a reduction from the accumulation fund and should be shrunk to a minimum.

The point here is that, seen in the context of the reproductive circuit of individual capital, consumption appears to be penetrated by the contradictions of the *total* capitalist mode of production. The core of these contradictions is the duality of the commodity as value and as use value. Value (and the production of capital) dominate use value, but do not eliminate it from material production and consumption. It is important to emphasize this, because there is a tendency within the subsumption approach to reduce the repression by value of material forms to the bare dialectics of the commodity. Krahl, for example, once said: 'Value reduces in social intercourse (gesellschaftlichen Verkehr) concrete things into the mere abstraction of value. Value is the abstraction from concrete use value, needs and interests; value is therefore repression' (Krahl, quoted in Schanz 1974). Schanz elaborates this:

Use value is not a form. It is rather a property of a material form in relation to a human need [and therefore] the property of use value becomes an appendix to a usurped material form, which states that now (as the social reproduction is determined by commodity production and circulation) use value and its material form are nothing else but (a) bearer of value and (b) its form of appearance (its 'Gegenständlichkeitsform') (Schanz 1974:105, 106).

The analysis of consumption in relation to the reproductive circuit of capital helps to reveal that use value is by no means only an appendix to value. Use value is an immanent necessity of the value-increasing process of capital. The distorting contradiction lies not *between* the commodity form of production and its content (material reproduction) but *within* the capitalist form of material reproduction itself. The 'logic' of 'Capital' reveals the inherently contradictory system of the capitalist mode of production, rather than merely proves the repressive potency of value on use value.

The analysis of the consumption process in the context of capital reproduction also reveals the one-sidedness of Haug's theory of commodity aesthetics. Realization of commodity capital is only one moment in which consumption participates in capital reproduction. As such, this function alone does not have the potency to distort the material structure of consumption or of production. The function of realization is complete as long as the products have apparent use value. Repression of use values is discernible only in the context of capital reproduction as a totality.

Limitations

The subsumptive exercise is indeed useful in defining the locus of consumption in the total reproductive circuit of capital in general. To what extent is it helpful to explain and uncover the apparent contradictions of material consumption of the present day: degeneration of the quality of consumption, inadequate standards of need-satisfaction, increasing use of alcohol and drugs, the power of advertisement, low quality of commercial entertainment and the like?

The dissection of the consumption process from the reproductive circuit of capital yields very general results concerning the subordination of consumption to the yoke of capitalism. These results, of course, hold true even in the capitalism of our days and the apparent contradictions of consumption might, to some extent, be understood as expressions of capitalist subordination in its present stage of development. This approach has not been tried systematically and therefore we do not know how far this alley would lead.

There is one problem, however, that seems insurmountable within the subsumption approach. Most of the contradictions of material consumption can be reduced to the problem of allocation of production between different consumable 'material forms' (products), viz: what needs are important, which needs are satisfied and which are not, and by what means they are reconciled. If use value is the necessary prerequisite for realization and if, at the same time, the particular use values of the products of capital are by and large irrelevant to the masters of industry, then the allocation of production is not easily related to reproduction of capital.

It is in the interests of capitalists to produce whatever is demanded. Therefore the problem is how (a) needs and (b) their transformation into effective demand are influenced by the reproduction of capital. It is often pointed out that the growing

degree of exploitation, the unequal and irrational formation of revenues, scientific and technological development, the increasing qualification of labour power as a result of rising degree of complication and intensity of work contribute to the widening gap between needs and their satisfaction (Der staatsmonopolistische . . . , pp. 276–280; Proletariat in der BRD, pp. 92–103 and 115–121). However, the particular qualitative aspects of consumption in which this gap appears, for example the increasing consumption of alcohol and drugs, inferior mass communication, etc. are still unexplained. It is probable that concepts relating the total life situation of the population to the contradictions in the reproduction of capital are required to complement the subsumption approach. Perhaps the recent rapture of sociologists over the 'way of life' concept will take us a little way.

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