The Neo-Liberal Consumer Subject

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In a political economy increasingly predicated on the sustenance of confident consumer spending and sustainable corporate responsibility, the framing of the consumer as site of ideology, resistance, activism and as basis for social order increasingly prevails. Several philosophers argue that therein lies a discursive displacement from the realms of the political; a shift that marks a transmutation from public to private and therefore a consequence of a reified neo-liberal order. The purpose of this paper is to explore the framing of the consumer within such a neo-liberal configuration. Recent decades have provided a broadening of the marketing concept and recognition of the productive sphere of consumption activity that has lead to an expanded understanding of who the consumer is and a discourse of a modernity predicated on a consumer culture. What is therefore needed within discussions of marketing and development is a critical understanding of the expanded parameters of the so-framed consumer subject. Such enquiry requires investigation into the epistemological problem of framing as well as inquiry into the conjuncture that results in the reproducibility of that framing.

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hegemonic “consumption as empowerment, liberation, and self-realization” accounts of much of consumer research from the 1990s up until now, characterized by “professors earnestly spying on young people at the mall, or obsessively staring at them in virtual communities” (Miller 2006, p.4). To paraphrase Littler (2009), it would be important to ask how the expansion of consumption (of brands, for example), and market relations more generally, comes to appeal to and activate the subject’s desire for democratic and participatory cultures and investigate critically how this energy is used or oriented? Responding to the neoliberal fantasies of empowerment and freedom through consumption does not mean to deny the possibility of emancipatory consumer politics or individual pleasure of consumption. But it means that we are conscious of the material conditions and institutional practices, and critical of the politics of subjectification, that installs an ideology of consumerism and ‘the market’ at the center of contemporary notions of citizenship, political participation, and practices of freedom.

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The meaning of the term “consumer” is in a constant state of expansion bringing us to a point in which consumption is understood to mediate the political economy, social structures and ideologies. Indeed it is now common for governments to claim legitimacy on the basis of an ability to deliver increased levels of consumer spending. Within this expanded frame, there appears to be significant overlap between the consumer subject and the radical political subject; hence we regularly encounter consumer research literature that analyses the consumer in terms of agency, empowerment, resistance, emancipation. Yet to consider the overlap between the consuming subject and the radical political subject is to acknowledge that, as Butler (2009) reminds, we are engaged in the practice of framing and that any application of a frame is an act of containing and determining and therefore any frame is an editorial embellishment of the object and is politically saturated. This insight creates an epistemological problem for a field which is concerned with expanding the frame of the consumer. This paper contends that the conceptual project of expanding the frame of the consumer converges with the neo-liberal enterprise which is concerned with the application of market rational to all walks of life. This is not to say that scholarly projects concerned with expanding the frame the consumer are somehow inherently neo-liberal but it is to say that we urgently to question the distinctions and convergences between how the enterprises frame the subjectivity and therefore what this paper attempts is to analyse the frame of the consumer from the perspective of the radical political subject. As such the paper is an attempt to reach outside of the canon of literature that exists within consumer research and conduct a literature review comprising of contemporary readings of consumer culture from major philosophical figures.

Neo-liberalism is generally understood to be concerned with a radically free market, maximized competition, free trade achieved through economic deregulation however as Brown (2005) identifies, neo-liberalism is sustained by a political rationality that produces its own normatives and subjectivities and is increasingly manifest as a type of common sense. This common sense concerns a systematic extension of market values to all institutions and social actions and a reconfiguration of all human and institutional activities as rational entrepreneurial actions.

The psychological internalisation of this neo-liberal rationality, according to Bauman (2005), creates a subjectivity best exemplified by immigration policies that promises entry visas for the “brightest and best.” In applying under such circumstances would-be migrants,
parallel to the faith of all subjects of a consumer culture, are in the business of promoting an attractive and desirable commodity to enhance the market value of the good they are selling, and of course, the good that they are selling is themselves. Hence for Bauman within a neo-liberal conjuncture consumers are simultaneously the promoters of commodities and the commodities being promoted.

However inasmuch as neo-liberalism always presents itself as a series of consumer choices and as much as the consumer decides, responsibility is devolved resulting in a social order which takes the form of what Zizek (2009) terms a self-propelling dance indifferent to its consequences in social reality. What follows, according to Zizek is consumers configured as passive nihilists, immersed in lifestyles, narratives and pleasures as they actively construct fake utopias with disregard to fates of those excluded. The fate of those excluded is writ large upon by various key theorists of our age including Bauman (2007), Badiou (2008) and Butler (2009) who all describe a rising context of systematic suspicion, contempt and surveillance of outsiders and a formation of an underclass of those unable to reconfigure themselves as commodities capable of generating value in a society of consumers. Hence the prevalence of neo-liberal rationality and its internalisation within the consumer subjectivity contains what Bauman describes as an ethical blind-spot which generates collateral damage in the form of social injustice. In a market rationality which treats entrepreneurialism as a normative, the corollary holds that we are not responsible for others. This rationale is described by Badiou as politically manifest as a form of what he terms Yankee Imperialism; a systematic servility towards the powerful, hard work by the poor and contempt and fear for those who do not live as consumers do. Encapsulated therein is a key distinction between the model neo-liberal consumers who, as described by Brown, strategises for themselves among various social, political and economic options and not one who strives with others to alter or organise those options, an opposite of a public-minded citizen.

The identification of a convergence between the framed consumer and model citizen within neo-liberalism with its attendant ethical blind spots and collateral social injustice raises important questions for the field of consumer research. The intended purpose of this paper is to identify these threads of thought that exist outside the field of consumer research and to present them for discussion within the context of the special session. It is submitted that seriousness of the issues of social injustice raised justify this unorthodox approach.

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