

# **The Very Idea of Consumption**

**Desire, phantasms, and the aesthetics of destruction in Western society**

David Graeber

2002

# Contents

ETYMOLOGIES . . . . .	4
THEORIES OF DESIRE . . . . .	7
LOVERS AND CONSUMERS . . . . .	9
COMPLICATIONS I: INDIVIDUALISM . . . . .	12
COMPLICATIONS II: SHIFTING LINES OF CLASS AND GENDER . . . . .	13
ON HAVING YOUR CAKE AND EATING IT TOO, AND CERTAIN PROBLEMS IN- CUMBENT THEREIN . . . . .	15
SACRIFICE . . . . .	18
CONCLUSIONS: BUT WHAT ABOUT CONSUMERISM? . . . . .	18

One of the nice things—if sometimes also one of the more irritating things—about anthropology is that it is uniquely well positioned to puncture theoretical assumptions. What I would like to do in this essay is to investigate one such assumption, or rather, set of assumptions: ones which have, in a way, become some of the philosophical underpinnings of our current civilization. I am speaking of the whole constellation of ideas surrounding the notion of “consumption”.

Let me clarify. I don't want to write a critique of consumption, the phenomenon. I want to ask why it is that we assume any such phenomenon exists. Why is it that when we see someone buying refrigerator magnets, and someone else putting on eye-liner, or cooking dinner, or singing at a karaoke bar, or just sitting around watching TV, we assume that they are on some level doing the same thing, something which can be described as “consumption” or “consumer behavior”, and that all these activities are in some way analogous to eating food. I want to ask where this term came from, why we ever started using it, what it says about our assumptions about property, desire, and social relations that we continue to use it; and finally, to suggest that maybe this is not the best way to think about such phenomena and that the time has come to come up with better ones.

To do so necessarily means taking on a whole intellectual industry that has developed, over the last few decades, around the study of consumption. For most scholars, not only is the category of “consumption” self-evident in its importance<sup>1</sup>, one of the greatest sins of past social theorists was to fail to sufficiently acknowledge it. Since the late '70s at least, theoretical discussions of consumption in anthropology—in sociology, semiotics or cultural studies too, for that matter—almost invariably begin by denouncing past scholars for having refused to give it sufficient due. Once upon a time, the story always seems to begin, we used to subscribe to a Marxist view of political economy that saw production as the motor of history, and only truly legitimate field of social struggle. Insofar as we even thought about consumption, or consumer demand, or anything of that sort, it was largely written off as an artificial creation, the results of manipulative techniques by advertisers and marketers meant to unload products that nobody really needed. But eventually, the story continues, we began to realize that this view was not only mistaken, it was also elitist and puritanical. Real working people find most of life's pleasures in consumption. What's more, they do not simply swallow whatever marketers throw at them like so many mindless automatons; they create their own meanings out of the products with which they chose to surround themselves. In fact, insofar as they fashion identities for themselves, those identities are largely based on what sort of cars they drive, what sort of clothes they wear, what sort of food they eat, what sort of movies they watch. It is consumption that gives meaning to the lives of the people we (in theory) wish to liberate.

Now, the interesting question about this story is who the “we” in question is supposed to be. After all, it's one thing to encounter such arguments coming from someone like Jean Baudrillard, who actually had started out as a traditional Marxist and been shaken up by the events of '68. It's quite another to hear the story invoked in the 1990s by cultural anthropologists like Jonathan Friedman (1994) or Daniel Miller (1995), members of a discipline that as far as I know never actually produced any such Frankfurt-school-style analysis of consumption to begin with. Why, then, decades later, are we still repeating variations on this same story?

---

<sup>1</sup> To take one example, a little while ago a book came out called “The Consumer Society Reader” (Schor & Holt 2000), which contains essays by twenty eight authors ranging from Thorsten Veblen to Tom Frank about consumption and consumerism. Not a single one of them stops to define either term, or pauses to reflect on why they are using them rather than something else.

No doubt there are many reasons. Probably one is that it echoes a common life experience for academics, who often do have to struggle to deal with their own youthful instincts of revulsion against consumer culture as they get older. It represents a real dilemma; but I think framing the story this way has some very perverse effects. Starting from Marx, and then critiquing him for neglecting consumption, allows us to preserve other Marxist categories completely unquestioned: particularly, the picture of the world as divided into two broad spheres, one of industrial production, another, of consumption—a view equally dear to Marxist theorists who once wished to challenge the world capitalist system, and to the Neoliberal economists who are currently managing it.

It is precisely this picture I would like to question here; to ask how it comes about that we call certain kinds of behavior “consumption”, rather than something else. It is a curious fact, for example, that those who write about consumption almost never define the term. I suspect this is in part because the tacit definition they are using is so extraordinarily broad. In common academic usage (and to an only slightly less degree, popular usage) “consumption” has come to mean “any activity that involves the purchase, use or enjoyment of any manufactured or agricultural product for any purpose other than the production or exchange of new commodities.” For most wage laborers, this means nearly anything they do when not working for wages. Imagine, for example, a bunch of teenagers who decide to form a band. They scare up some instruments, teach themselves how to play them; they write songs, come up with an act, practice long hours in the garage. Now, it seems reasonable to see such behavior as production of some sort or another; but in existing social science literature, it would be much more likely to be placed in the sphere of consumption, simply because they did not themselves manufacture the guitars!<sup>2</sup> It is precisely by defining ‘consumption’ so broadly, in fact, that one can then turn around and claim that consumption has been falsely portrayed as passive acquiescence, when in fact it is more often an important form of creative self-expression. True enough, if one insists on defining consumption in this all inclusive way. But couldn’t one just as easily take this to refer to the rather unremarkable fact that in the contemporary world, it’s pretty much impossible to engage in any form of creative self-expression that does not involve the use of manufactured products? In other words: so what? Why does the fact that manufactured goods are involved in an activity automatically become so important that it comes to define the nature of the activity itself?

It seems to me that this theoretical choice—the very idea of “consumption”, the very assumption that the main thing people do when they are not working is “consuming” things—carries within it a tacit cosmology, a theory of human desire and fulfillment whose implications we would do well to think about.<sup>3</sup> This is what I want to investigate in the rest of this paper.

Let me begin by looking at the history of the word itself.

## ETYMOLOGIES

The English “to consume” derives from the Latin verb *consumere*, meaning “to seize or take over completely”, and hence, by extension, to “eat up, devour, waste, destroy, or spend”. To be

---

<sup>2</sup> Especially if the band had not yet received a record contract or many professional gigs; if they were able to market some kind of product, it might be considered production again.

<sup>3</sup> Here I also want to answer some of the questions rather left dangling at the end of my book on value theory (Graeber 2001).

consumed by fire, or for that matter consumed with rage, still holds the same implications: not just thoroughly taken over, but overwhelmed in a way that dissolves away the very autonomy of the object, or even, that destroys the object itself.

In early French and English usages—"consumption" first appears in English in the fourteenth century—the connotations were almost always negative. To consume something meant to destroy it, to make it burn up, evaporate, or waste away. Hence wasting diseases "consumed" their victims: a usage that according to the Oxford English Dictionary is already documented by 1395, which is why tuberculosis came to be known as "consumption". Consuming in the now-familiar sense of eating or drinking was, at first, very much a secondary meaning.

Rather, when applied to material goods, 'consumption' was almost always synonymous with waste: it meant destroying something that did not have to be (at least quite so thoroughly) destroyed.<sup>4</sup>

The contemporary usage, then, is relatively recent. If we were still talking the language of the fourteenth or even seventeenth centuries, a "consumer society" would have meant a society of wastrels and destroyers.

Consumption in the contemporary sense only really emerges in the Political Economy literature in the late eighteenth century, when authors like Adam Smith and David Ricardo began to use it as the opposite of 'production'.<sup>5</sup> One of the crucial features of the new, capitalist system that was emerging at the time was a growing separation between the places in which people—or men, at least—worked and the places where they lived. Especially with the industrial revolution, it became possible to imagine that the "economy" (itself a very new concept) was divided into two completely separate spheres: the workplace, in which goods were "produced", and the household, in which they were "consumed". That which was created in one sphere was used, and ultimately, used up, destroyed, in the other. Vintners produce wine; consumers take it home and drink it; chemical plants produce ink, consumers take it home, put it in pens, and write with it, and so on. Of course even from the start, the usage could often seem strained. It's much more difficult to see in what sense consumers are really "consuming" silverware, or books, or television sets, since these are not destroyed by use; but since just about anything does, eventually, wear out or have to be replaced, the usage was not entirely implausible.

Phrasing things in these terms did, certainly, bring home one of the defining features of capitalism: that it is a motor of endless production; one that can only maintain its equilibrium, in fact, by continual growth. Endless cycles of destruction do seem to be, necessarily, the other side of this. To make way for new products, all that old stuff must somehow be cleared away; destroyed, or at least, cast aside as outmoded or irrelevant. And this is indeed the defining feature of "consumer society" as usually described (especially by its critics): one that casts aside any lasting values in the name of an endless cycling of ephemera. It is a society of sacrifice and destruction. And often, what seems to most fascinate Western scholars—and the Western public—about people living in radically different economic circumstances are phenomena that seem to mirror this in one way or another. George Bataille (1937) saw here a clue to the nature of culture itself, whose essence he saw as lying in apparently irrational acts of wild sacrificial destruction, for which he

---

<sup>4</sup> In French the word *consummation*, which is from a different root, eventually displaced consumption. But the idea of taking possession of an object seems to remain; and any number of authors have remarked on the implied parallel between sexual appropriation and eating food.

<sup>5</sup> "Produce" is derived from a Latin word meaning to "bring out" (a usage still preserved in phrases like "the defense produced a witness..." or "he produced a flashlight from under his cloak") or "to put out" (as from a factory).

drew on examples such as Aztec human sacrifice or the Kwakiutl potlatch.<sup>6</sup> Or, more to the point, consider the fascination with the potlatch itself.

It's hard not to think about Northwest Coast potlatch without immediately evoking images of chiefs setting fire to vast piles of wealth—such images play a central role not only in Bataille's but just about every popular essay on 'gift economies' since. If one examines the sources though, it turns out this almost never really happened; really, all these people are fascinated not with 'the potlatch' (a usually fairly sedate ceremony involving the distribution of blankets or other wealth) but by three or four extremely unusual Kwakiutl potlatches held around 1900, at a time when the Kwakiutl population was declining catastrophically during an unprecedented economic boom. Clearly, the spectacle of chiefs vying for titles by setting fire to piles of blankets or other valuables strikes our imagination not so much because it reveals some fundamental truth about human nature, largely suppressed in our own society, than some barely hidden truth about the nature of our own consumer society.

"Consumption", then, refers to an image of human existence that first appears, in the West, around the time of the industrial revolution: one that sees what humans do outside the workplace largely as a matter of destroying things or using them up. It is especially easy to make out the impoverishment this introduces into accustomed ways of talking about of the basic sources of human desire and gratification by comparing it to the ways earlier Western thinkers had talked about such matters. St. Augustine or Hobbes, for example, both saw human beings as creatures of unlimited desire, and therefore concluded that if left to their own devices, they would always end up locked in competition. As Marshall Sahlins has pointed out (2001:XXX), in this they almost exactly anticipated the assumptions of later economic theory. But when they listed what it was that humans desired, neither emphasized anything like the modern notion of consumption. In fact, both came up with more or less the same list: humans, they said, desire (1) sensual pleasures, (2) the accumulation of riches (a pursuit assumed to be largely aimed at winning the praise and esteem of others), and (3) power.<sup>7</sup> None were primarily about using things up.<sup>8</sup> Even Adam Smith, who first introduced the term "consumption" in its modern sense in *The Wealth of Nations*, turned to an entirely different framework when he tried to develop a systematic theory of desire in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*: one that assumed that what most humans want above all is to be the object of others' sympathetic attention.<sup>9</sup> It was only with the growth of economic theory, and its gradual colonization of other disciplines, that desire itself began to be imagined as the desire to consume.

The notion of consumption, then, that assumes that human fulfillment is largely about acts of (more or less ceremonial) material destruction, represents something of a break in the Western

---

<sup>6</sup> Bataille's argument was that production, which Marx saw as quintessentially human, is also the domain of activity most constrained by practical considerations; consumption, the least so. To discover what is really important to a culture, therefore, one should look not at how they make things but how they destroy them.

<sup>7</sup> Similar lists appear throughout the Western tradition. Kant also had three—wealth, power, and prestige—interestingly, skipping pleasure.

<sup>8</sup> The sensual pleasures they had in mind seem to have centered as much on having sex as on eating food, on lounging on silk pillows as burning incense or hashish; and by 'wealth' both seemed to have in mind first and foremost permanent things like mansions, landed estates, and magnificent jewelry than consumables.

<sup>9</sup> One could conceivably argue that Smith's approach to questions of desire and fulfillment is so one-sided, centering almost entirely on social recognition and immaterial rewards (wealth, in his system, was only really desirable insofar as wealthy people were more likely to be the object of others' attention and spontaneous sympathetic concern) that it forms a kind of anticipatory opposite of the consumption model that was to develop from his work.

tradition. It's hard to find anything written before, say, the 18<sup>th</sup> century that exactly anticipates it. It appears abruptly, mainly in countries like England and France, at exactly the moment when historians of those places begin to talk about the rise of something they call "consumer society", or simply "consumerism" (XXX, YYY, W. Smith 2002). That is, the moment when a significant portion of the population could be said to be organizing their lives around the pursuit of something called "consumer goods", defined as goods they did not see as necessities, but as in some sense objects of desire, chosen from a range of products, subject to the whims of fashion (ephemera again...), and so on. The ideology, and the practice, would seem to emerge as two sides of the same coin.

## THEORIES OF DESIRE

All this makes it sound as if the story should really begin around 1750, or even 1776. But could something that important—such basic questions about what people thought life is about—really change that abruptly? It seems to me there are other ways to tell the story, which reveal much greater continuities. One would be to examine the concept of "desire" itself, as it emerged in the Western philosophical tradition.

Now, this might seem difficult to do because Western thinking on the matter contains a number of apparently contradictory strands. Since Plato, the most common approach has been to see desire as rooted in a feeling of absence or lack. This does make a certain obvious intuitive sense. One desires what one doesn't have. One feels an absence; imagines how one might like to fill it; this very action of the mind is what we think of as "desire". But there is also an alternative tradition that goes back at least to Spinoza, that starts off not from the yearning for some absent object, but from something even more fundamental: self-preservation, the desire to continue to exist. (As Nietzsche puts it, "life which desires itself"). Here desire becomes the fundamental energetic glue that makes individuals what they are over time. Both strands continue to do battle in contemporary social theory as well. Desire as lack is especially developed in the work of Jacques Lacan. The key notion here is of the "mirror stage", where an infant, who is at first really a bundle of drives and sensations unaware of its own existence as a discrete, bounded entity, manages to construct a sense of self around some external image: for example, an encounter with her own reflection in the mirror. One can generalize from here a much broader theory of desire (or perhaps, of desire in its more tawdry, narcissistic forms), where the object of desire is always some image of perfection, an imaginary completion for one's own ruptured sense of self (Graeber 2002). But then there is also the approach adopted by authors like Deleuze and Guattari (1983), who wrote *Anti-Oedipus*, their famous critique of psychoanalysis, largely as an attack on this kind of thinking. Appealing to the Spinozist/Nietzschean tradition, they deny that desire should be found in any sense of lack at all. Rather, it is something that "flows" between everyone and everything; much like power in Foucault, it becomes the energy knitting everything together. As such, desire is everything and nothing; there's little one can actually say about it.

One might be tempted to conclude at this point, that "desire" is not a very useful theoretical concept<sup>10</sup>—that is, something which can be meaningfully distinguished from needs, or urges, or intentions—since even authors working within the same, Western tradition can't make up their

---

<sup>10</sup> Working here on the assumption that if one examines any intellectual tradition carefully enough, one could find the materials for a genuinely insightful analysis of such "big questions"—i.e., sufficient perusal of the Buddhist would also have yielded useful results, had I been competent to do it, which I'm not.

minds what it is supposed to mean. But I don't think this is true. If one goes back to the origins of the alternative tradition in Spinoza, one soon discovers that the two strands are not nearly as different as they appear. When Spinoza refers to the universal driving force of all beings to persist in their being and expand their powers of action, he is really not referring to desire (*cupiditas*) as much as to what he calls *conatus*, which is usually translated "will". On a bodily level, *conatus* takes the form of a host of appetites: attractions, dispositions, and so forth. Desire is "the idea of an appetite", the imaginative construction one puts on some such attraction or disposition.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the one constant element in all these definitions is that desire (unlike needs, urges, or intentions) necessarily involves the imagination. Objects of desire are always imaginary objects, and usually, imaginary totalities of some sort—since totalities themselves are usually imaginary objects.

If one wanted to make desire into a truly useful theoretical concept, though, I think one has to add another element. This is the fact that, as Tzvetan Todorov puts it (2001:XXX) desire is always the desire for a social relation; it involves some kind of quest for recognition. The problem is that, owing to the extreme individualism typical of the Western philosophical tradition, this tends to be occluded; even where it isn't, the desire for recognition is assumed to be the basis for some kind of profound existential conflict. The key text here is Hegel's "On Lordship and Bondage", the famous "master/slave dialectic" in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, that has made it difficult for future theorists to think of this kind of desire without also thinking of violence and domination.

If I may be allowed a very abbreviated summary of Hegel's argument<sup>12</sup>: human beings are not animals because they have the capacity for self-consciousness. To be self-conscious means to be able to look at ourselves from an outside perspective—that must necessarily be that of another human being. None of this was particularly new or original at the time. Hegel's great innovation was to connect this with desire, to point out that to do that, one has to have some reason to want to do so. But this sort of desire is also inherent to the nature of humanity, he argues, because unlike animals humans desire recognition. Animals experience desire simply as the absence of something: they are hungry, therefore they wish "negate that negation" by obtaining food; they have sexual urges, therefore they seek a mate.<sup>13</sup> Humans go beyond this. They not only wish to have sex—at least, if they are being truly human about the matter— they also wish to be recognized by their partner as someone worthy of having sex with. That is: they wish to be loved. We desire to be the objects of another's desire. So far this seems straightforward enough: human desire implies mutual recognition. The problem is that for Hegel, the quest for mutual recognition inevitably leads to violent conflict, to "life and death struggles" for supremacy. He provides a little parable: two men confront each other at the beginning of history (as in all such stories, they appear to be 40-year-old males who simply rose out of the earth fully formed). Each wishes to be recognized by the other as a free, autonomous, fully human being. But in order for the other's recognition to be meaningful, he must prove to himself the other is fully human, and worthy of recognizing him; the only way to do this is to see if he values his freedom and autonomy so much he's willing to risk his life for it. A battle ensues. But a battle for recognition is inherently unwinnable, since if you kill your opponent, there's no one to recognize you; on

---

<sup>11</sup> For the best collection of essays on Spinoza's theory of desire, see Yovel 1999. On his theory of imagination, see Gates & Lloyd 1999.

<sup>12</sup> I am especially drawing on the famous "strong reading" of this passage by Alexander Kojève (1969).

<sup>13</sup> In Hegel's language, they construct themselves as a negation, therefore they seek to negate that negation by negating something else – i.e., by eating it.



the other hand if your opponent surrenders, he proves by that very act that he was not willing to sacrifice his life for recognition after all, and therefore, that his recognition is meaningless. One can of course reduce a defeated opponent to slavery, but even that is self-defeating because once one reduces the Other to slavery, one becomes dependent on one's slave for one's very material survival, while the slave at least produces his own life, and is in fact able to realize himself to some degree through his work.

Clearly there is something profoundly true here. But it's one thing to say that the quest for mutual recognition is necessarily going to be tricky, full of pitfalls, with a constant danger of descending into attempts to dominate or even obliterate the other. It's another thing to assume from the start that mutual recognition is impossible. As Majeed Yar has pointed out (2001) this assumption has come to dominate almost all subsequent Western thinking on the subject: especially, since Sartre refigured recognition as "the gaze" that, he argued, necessarily pins down, squashes, and objectifies the Other.<sup>14</sup> As in so much Western theory, when social relations are not simply ignored, they are assumed to be inherently competitive. Todorov notes (2000:XXX) that much of this is the result of starting one's examples with a collection of adult males: psychologically, he argues, it is quite possible to argue that the first moment in which we act as fully human beings is when we seek recognition from others; but that's because the first thing a human baby does that an animal baby does not do is to try to catch her mother's eye, an act with different implications.

At this point I think we have the elements for a preliminary synthesis. Insofar as it is useful to distinguish something called "desire" from needs, urges, or intentions, then, it is because desire

- a. is always rooted in imagination
- b. tends to direct itself towards some kind of social relation, real or imaginary
- c. that social relation generally entails a desire for some kind of recognition, and hence, an imaginative reconstruction of the self; a process fraught with dangers of destroying that social relation, or turning it into some kind of terrible conflict.

Now, all this is more arranging the elements of a possible theory than proposing one; it leaves open the actual mechanics of how these elements interact. But if nothing else, it helps explain why the word "desire" has become so popular with authors who write about modern consumerism—which is, we are told, all about imaginary pleasures, and the construction of identities. But even here, the historical connections between ideas are not what one might have initially imagined.

## LOVERS AND CONSUMERS

Let me start with the argument of Colin Campbell's *Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1987), one of the more creative recent essays on the subject. Campbell is trying to provide an alternative to the usual critique of consumer culture as throwing up all sorts of wonderful fantasies about what you'll get when you purchase some product, and inevitably disappointing you once you get it. It is this constant lack of satisfaction, the argument goes, that

---

<sup>14</sup> Lacan's "mirror phase" itself actually draws directly on Hegel... (Casey & Woody 1983). I might note too that it's the Hegel-Kojève-Sartre connection which is responsible for the habit of writing about "the Other" with a capital "O", as an inherently unknowable creature.

then drives endless purchasing, and thus, allows endless expansion of production. If the system delivered on its promises, it wouldn't work. Campbell isn't denying this happens so much as questioning whether the process itself is really so frustrating or unpleasant as most accounts imply. Really he says, all this is a form of pleasure in itself. It is the unique accomplishment of modern consumerism to have assisted in the creation of a genuinely new form of hedonism, all its own (one first spearheaded in Romantic and bohemian circles). "Traditional hedonism", Campbell argues, was based on the direct experience of pleasure: sex and drugs and rock'n'roll or their local equivalents. The problem with it, from a capitalist perspective, is that there are inherent limits to it. People become sated, bored. There are logistical problems."Modern self-illusory hedonism" as he calls it solves this dilemma because here, what one is really consuming are fantasies and day-dreams about what having a certain product would be like. The rise of this new kind of hedonism, he argues, can be traced back to certain sensational forms of Puritan religious life, but primarily, to the new interest in pleasure through the vicarious experience of extreme emotions and states that one sees emerge in the popularity of Gothic novels and the like in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and that peaks with Romanticism itself. The result is a social order that has become, in large measure, a vast apparatus for the fashioning of day-dreams. These reveries attach themselves to the promise of pleasure afforded by some particular consumer good, or set of them; they produce the endless desires that drive consumption; but in the end, the real enjoyment is not in the consumption of the physical objects, but in the reveries themselves.

The problem with this argument—or, one of them, one could find all sorts—is the claim that all of this was something new. It's not just that, as one might suspect, pleasure through vicarious participation in extreme experience did not really only become significant social phenomenon in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, it was accepted wisdom even in the 11<sup>th</sup> century that desire was largely about taking pleasure in fantasies.

Here I turn to the work of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1993) and the Romanian historian of religions Ioan Couliano (1987) on Medieval and Renaissance theories of love.<sup>15</sup> These theories all turned on the notion of what was called the 'pneumatic system'.

One of the greatest problem in Medieval metaphysics was to explain how it was possible for the soul (or mind) to perceive objects in the material world, since the two were assumed to be of absolutely alien natures. The solution was to posit an intermediate astral substance called *pneuma*, or spirit, that translated sense impressions into phantasmic images. These images then circulated through the body's pneumatic system (which centered on the heart) before they could be comprehended by the intellectual faculties of the soul. Since this was essentially the zone of imagination, all sensations, or even abstract ideas, had to proceed through the imagination—becoming emotionally charged in the process—before they could reach the mind. Hence erotic theory held that when a man fell in love, he was really in love not with the woman herself but with her image; an image that, once lodged in his pneumatic system, gradually came to hijack it, vampirizing his imagination and ultimately drawing off all his physical and spiritual energies. Medical writers tended to represent this as a disease that needed to be cured; poets and lovers, a heroic state that combined pleasures (in fantasy, but also, somewhat perversely, in the very experience of frustration and denial) with an intrinsic spiritual or mystical value in itself. The one thing all agreed on though is that anyone who got the idea that one could resolve the matter

---

<sup>15</sup> It would appear that much of Couliano's work draws on Agamben for inspiration, though Couliano only cites Agamben occasionally, and always to attack him on minor points.

by “embracing” the object of his fantasy was missing the point. The very idea was considered a symptom of a profound mental disorder, a species of melancholia. Agamben on Ficino:

In the same passage, the specific character of melancholic Eros was identified by Ficino as disjunction and excess. “This tends to occur,” he wrote, “to those who, mis-using love, transform what rightly belongs to contemplation into the desire of the embrace.” The erotic intention that unleashes the melancholic disorder presents itself as that which would possess and touch what ought merely to be the object of contemplation, and the tragic insanity of the saturnine temperament thus finds its root in the intimate contradiction of a gesture that would embrace the unobtainable.” (1993a:17–18)

Agamben goes on to quote the French Scholastic Henry of Ghent, to the effect that melancholics “cannot conceive the incorporeal” as such, because they do not know “how to extend their intelligence beyond space and size.” For such depressive characters, lonely brooding is punctuated by frustrated urges to seize what cannot really be seized.

That is the incapacity of conceiving the incorporeal and the desire to make of it the object of an embrace are two faces of the same coin, of the process in whose course the traditional contemplative vocation of the melancholic reveals itself vulnerable to the violent disturbance of desire menacing it from within (1993a:18).

Now, one might quibble over whether anyone was ever quite so consistently pure in their affections as all this might imply; a fair amount of “embracing” certainly did go on; but this was the ideal, and critically it became the model for desire in general, not just sexual desire.

Which leads to the interesting suggestion that, from the perspective of Medieval psychological theory, our entire civilization is really based on a form of clinical depression. Which in some ways does actually make a lot of sense.<sup>16</sup>

Couliano is more interested in how erotic theory was appropriated by Renaissance magicians like Giordano Bruno, for whom the mechanics of sexual attraction became the paradigm for all forms of attraction or desire, and hence, the key to social power. If human beings tend to become dominated by powerful, emotionally charged images, then anyone who developed a comprehensive, scientific understanding of the mechanics by which such images work could become a master manipulator. It should be possible to develop techniques for “binding” and influencing others’ minds: for instance, by fixing certain emotionally charged images in their heads,<sup>17</sup> or even little bits of music (jingles, basically) that could be designed in such a way as to keep coming back into people’s minds despite themselves, and pull them in one direction or another. In all of this Couliano sees, not unreasonably, the first self-conscious form of the modern arts of propaganda and advertising. Bruno felt his services should be of great interest to princes and politicians.

It apparently never occurred to Bruno or anyone else, in this early period, to apply such proto-advertising techniques to economic rather than political purposes. Politics, after all, is about relations between people. Manipulating other people was by definition a political business. Which

---

<sup>16</sup> There is a lot of evidence which suggests that levels of clinical depression do in fact rise sharply in consumer-oriented societies; they have certainly been rising steadily in the U.S. for most of the century.

<sup>17</sup> Along lines already developed by the *Art of Memory*: see Yates XXX.

I think brings out the most fundamental difference between the Medieval conception of desire and the sort of thing Campbell describes. If one starts with a model of desire where the object of desire is assumed to be a human being, then it only makes sense that one cannot completely possess the object. (“Embrace” is a nice metaphor, actually, because it is so inherently temporary.) And one is presumably not intentionally in the business of destroying it either.

One might say, then, as a starting point, that the shift from the kind of model of desire that predominated in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, to the kind of consumerist model described by Campbell, is a shift from one whose paradigm is erotic, to one in which the primary metaphor (“consumption” again) is eating food.

## COMPLICATIONS I: INDIVIDUALISM

Still, even if one examines the original, Medieval version, the basic conception is already extremely individualistic. This is because it is so passive. Desire is the result of an individual receiving sense impressions from outside. Now, it is certainly true that this is one very common experience of desire: desire as something that seems to seize us outside our conscious control, let alone our better judgment, and often, cause us to do things for which we would really rather not feel entirely responsible. But it also allows us to overlook the fact that desire emerges in relations between people.

It’s easier to see all this if one compares this Western model of desire, as developed explicitly in Medieval and Renaissance theory and tacitly through the sort of consumer practice Campbell describes, to, say, the kind of value-based approach I have tried to develop elsewhere (Graeber 2001). That approach set out in part from Marx’s analysis of money, which in turn emerged from Marx’s own particular take on the labor theory of value which held that the best way to measure the importance a society gives to certain products is to measure how much of its people’s total creative energies they put into creating and maintaining them. Of all the productive labor performed in a society, what proportion ends up being allocated to X or Y or Z? This is its value. Under capitalism, money plays a unique role in this process because workers are paid for their work (or more exactly, for their “time”) with the same stuff that others will later use to buy what they produce. This means it’s possible to measure the proportion of labor on the market pretty precisely; certainly much more than under any other way of organizing labor. But it also has profound effects on people’s perceptions. For one thing, it means that from the point of view of a wage laborer, money is both (a) a representation of the value, or importance, of their own labor, and at the same time (b) an object of desire that in fact motivates one to engage in the very forms of action (productive labor) whose value it represents—since obviously it is to get the money that one does the work. As such it becomes a kind of fetishistic object that seems to have an appeal and power in an of itself.

In Marx’s analysis of capitalism, the same can be said of all sorts of other objects too: commodities, from the point of view of potential purchasers, capital, from the point of view of capitalists, and so on. But even in the absence of a market, something similar happens, though through somewhat different mechanisms (viz., Turner 1984, Graeber op cit). Always, value is the way actors’ action take on their full significance, or importance, to those actors by being incorporated in some larger collective system of meaning.<sup>18</sup> Always, this can only take place through

---

<sup>18</sup> This is intended to combine the best insights of the Saussurean, and the interpretivist, approaches to meaning.

some kind of concrete medium—wampum, oratorical performances, sumptuous tableware, kula artifacts, Egyptian pyramids—that tend to incorporate in their own structure the structure of the forms of creative action that bring them into being.

The critical thing is that the value-based model is all about capacities and dispositions for action. It is the underlying patterns and principles that structure forms of action that reappear in these spectral, fetishized forms. There is a complex circularity, whereby that which is in fact a model of certain forms of action reappears as an object of desire that inspires one to act in those forms; the desire for money, which is a representation of the value of labor, inspires one to labor; the desire for tokens of honor inspires forms of honorable behavior; the desire for tokens of love inspires romantic behavior; and so on. Value itself is the way that the importance of one's own actions register in the imagination—but always, by translation into some larger social language, by being integrated into some greater social whole. Almost always, this also ends up involving a certain degree of fetishization, where the objects end up appearing, from the actors' perspective, to be the source of the very powers by which they are in fact created; because, from the actors' position, this might as well be true.<sup>19</sup>

By contrast the Medieval theory begins not from actions but the opposite, what might once have been called “passions”. Godfrey Leinhardt (1961:XXX) long ago pointed out how these two form a logical set—either you act on the world, or the world acts on you—but we have become so uncomfortable with the idea of seeing ourselves as passive recipients that the latter term has largely disappeared, even when we talk about experience. Medieval and Early Modern authors did not yet have such qualms. In pneumatic theory, “passions” are not what one does but what is done to one (in which one is not agent but ‘patient’); at the same time, they referred, as they do now, to strong emotions, that seemed to seize us against our will.

The two were linked: emotions like love were in fact seen as being caused by just such impressions on the pneumatic system. Far from being models of action, in fact, the passivity of the situation came to be seen as a virtue in itself: those who tried to act on their passions, to seize the object rather than contemplate it, were profoundly mistaken.

Framing things in such passive terms then opened the way for the extreme individualism, an individualism that appears to be the other side of the peculiarly Western theory of desire. A schema of action is almost of necessity a collective product; the impression of a beautiful image is something that one can imagine involves a relation between only two people, or even (insofar as love became a mystical phenomenon), between the desirer and God. Even with romantic love, the ideal was that it should not really be translated into an ongoing social relation, but remain a matter of contemplation and fantasy.

## COMPLICATIONS II: SHIFTING LINES OF CLASS AND GENDER

If the traditional Western way of conceptualizing desire was already so highly individualistic, it makes it easier to understand how it might be possible to shift from erotic fantasies to something more like the modern idea of ‘consumption’. The transition, it seems to me, also required a series of conceptual shifts and displacements, both in terms of class and in terms of gender.

---

<sup>19</sup> Often as not, they become imaginary micro-totalities which play the same role as Lacan's mirror-objects (Graeber 1996a; 2001:XXX)...

Compare for example how images of paradise, in the Middle Ages and Early Modern periods, varied by social milieu. When peasants, craftsmen and the urban poor tried to imagine a land in which all desires would be fulfilled, they tended to focus on the abundance of food.

Hence the land of Cockaigne, where bloated people loll about as geese fly fully cooked into their mouths, rivers run with beer, and so forth. Carnival, as Mikhail Bakhtin so richly illustrated, expands on all the same themes, jumbling together every sort of bodily indulgence and enormity, pleasures sexual as well as gastronomic and of every other kind, but the predominant imagery always centers on sausages, hogsheads, legs of mutton, lard and tripe and tubs of wine. The emphasis on food is in striking contrast with visions of earthly paradise in other parts of the world at that time (say, those prevalent in Islamic world), that were mostly about sex. Erotic fantasies are usually strikingly absent from the literature on the Land of Cockaigne; or if they are present, seem thrown in rather in way of an afterthought.

As Herman Pleij has pointed out (2001:421), the Medieval high culture version of paradise was in many ways conceived in direct opposition to the popular one. Not that it emphasized erotic pleasures either. Instead, it tended to fix on what we would now call elite consumables, the exotic commodities of the day that were primarily, essences: spices, most of all, but also incense, perfumes and similar delicate scents and flavors. Instead of the Land of Cockaigne, one finds a hankering after the lost Garden of Eden, thought to exist somewhere in the East, near the fabled kingdom of Prester John; anyway, from somewhere near those fragrant lands whence cardamom, mace, peppers and cumin (not to mention frank incense and myrrh) were harvested. Rather than a land of complete, fatty indulgences in every sort of food, these were often conceived as lands whose ethereal inhabitants did not have to eat at all, but simply subsisted on beautiful smells (viz. also Schivelbusch 1992). This emphasis on refined flavors and fragrances in turn opens onto a whole different realm of experience: of “taste”, ephemerality, fleeting essences, and ultimately, the familiar elite consumption worlds of fashion, style, the pursuit of ungraspable novelty. Once again, then, the elite—who in fact grasped and embraced a great deal—constructed their ideal of desire around that which somehow seemed to escape that. One might argue, then, that the modern consumer ethos is built on a kind of fusion between these two class ideals. The shift from a conception desire modeled on erotic love to one based on the desire for food (“consumption”) was clearly a shift in the direction of popular discourse; at the same time, though, one might say the innovative aspect of modern, consumeristic theories of desire is to combine the popular materialist emphasis on consumption with the notion of the ephemeral, ungraspable image as the driving force of maximization of production.

This might at least suggest a solution to what has always struck me as a profound paradox in Western social theory. As I’ve already noted, the idea of human beings as creatures tainted by original sin, and therefore, cursed with infinite wants, who therefore were in an almost natural state of competition with each other, was already fully developed in authors like St. Augustine, and therefore a part of Christian doctrine throughout the Middle Ages. But at the same time, very few people, during the Middle Ages, actually seemed to behave like this. Economically, we are still in the domain of ‘target incomes’, in which the typical reaction to economic good times, even among urban craftsmen and most of the proto-bourgeoisie, was to take more days off. It’s as if the notion of the maximizing individual existed in theory long before it emerged in practice. One explanation might be that until the Early Modern period, at least, high culture (whether in its most Christian or most courtly versions) tended to devalue any open display of greed, appetite, or acquisitiveness, while popular culture—which could sometimes heartily embrace such impulses—

did so in forms that were inherently collective. When the Land of Cockaigne was translated into reality it was in the form of popular festivals like Carnival; almost any increase in popular wealth was immediately diverted into communal feasts, parades, and collective indulgences. One of the processes that made capitalism possible then was the privatization of desire. The highly individualistic perspectives of the elite had to be combined on the materialistic indulgences of what Bakhtin liked to call the “material lower stratum”.

Getting from there to anything like the capitalist notion of consumption required, I think, one further shift: this time, not along lines of class, but of gender. The courtly love literature, and related theories of desire, obviously represent an extremely male perspective. Even women, when they wrote love poems, tended to adopt a male point of view. This no doubt applies to fantasies about the Land of Cockaigne and similar idealized worlds of gastronomic fulfillment, too. Though here it was complicated the fact that, in the folk psychology of the day, women were widely considered more lustful, greedy, and generally desirous than men.

Insofar as anyone was represented as insatiable, then, it was women: the image of woman as a ravenous belly, demanding ever more sex and food, and men as haplessly laboring in an endless, but ultimately impossible, effort to satisfy them, is a standard misogynist topos going back at least to Hesiod. Christian doctrine only reinforced it saddling women with the primary blame for original sin, and thus arguing that they bore the brunt of the punishment. It was only around the time of the industrial revolution, and the full split between workplace and household, that this sort of rhetoric was largely set aside; curiously, at just the same time as consumption came to be seen as an essentially feminine business (Thomas 1971:568–569; Davis 1975 125–151; Graeber 1997:XXX).

## **ON HAVING YOUR CAKE AND EATING IT TOO, AND CERTAIN PROBLEMS INCUMBENT THEREIN**

What I am suggesting then, is that while Medieval moralists accepted, in the abstract, that humans were cursed with limitless desires (that, as Augustine put it, their natures rebelled against them just as they had rebelled against God), they did not think this was an existential dilemma which affected them; rather, people tended to attribute such sinful predilections mainly to people they saw as social, and therefore moral, inferiors. Men saw women as insatiable; prosperous women saw the poor as grasping and materialistic, and so on. It was really in the Early Modern period that all this began to change.

Agamben has a theory about why it happened. He suggests that the very idea that all humans are driven by infinite, unquenchable desires is only really possible when one severs imagination and experience. In the world posited by Medieval psychology, desires really could be satisfied for the very reason that they were really directed at phantasms: imagination was the zone in which subject and object, lover and beloved, really could genuinely meet and partake of one another. But starting with Descartes, he argues, imagination was redefined as something inherently separate from experience—as, in fact, as a compendium of all those things (dreams, flights of fancy, pictures in the mind) that one feels one has experienced but really hasn't. It was at this point, once we were expected to try to satisfy one's desires in what we have come to think of as “the real world”, that the ephemeral nature of experience, and therefore of any “embrace”, becomes an impossible

dilemma (1993b:25–28). One is already seeing such dilemmas worked out in De Sade, he argues: again, around the very dawn of consumer culture.

This is pretty much the argument one would have to make, if one were to confine oneself, as Agamben does, entirely to literary and philosophical texts. In the last couple sections I've been trying to develop a more socially nuanced approach, which argues among other things that the modern concept of "consumption", which carries in it the tacit assumption that there's no end to what anyone might want, could really only take form once certain elite concepts of desire—as the pursuit of ephemera and phantasms—fused, effectively, with the popular emphasis on food. Still, I don't think this is quite a complete or adequate explanation. I think there's another element, which made all this possible; perhaps, which made it inevitable. This was the rise, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, of what C. B. MacPherson first called "possessive individualism" (1962), the fact that people increasingly came to define their very relation with the world in terms of property rights. It was only then that the problem of how one could "have" things, or for that matter experiences ("we'll always have Paris") could really become a crisis.<sup>20</sup>

The notion of 'consumption', I would suggest, resolves a certain contradiction—or anyway, dilemma—inherent in the very nature of property. From an analytical perspective, of course, property is a social relation: it consists of the right to exclude "all the world" from access to a certain house, or shirt, or piece of land (and of course, to make exceptions on such terms as one cares to). But a relation so broad is easy to imagine simply as a relation between a person and an object. But what could a relation between a person and an object actually consist of?

From a purely subjective point of view, I would suggest that the Western notion of ownership combines at least three different elements (ones that could easily be seen as separate, and in other traditions certainly are). It's this combination I suspect that makes true possession seem an impossibility:

1. an element of "identification" or "belonging": when I say "my chair", I might be referring to a chair I own, or just the one I am sitting on at the moment, in contrast to other chairs that other people are sitting on. It is much as one might refer to "my mother" or "my boss". What is in social terms a matter of comparison though tends to become, in subjective terms, a matter of personal identification or participation in some object.
2. an element of access, or control: this is the subjective concomitant of rights of exclusion, which is what property rights basically come down to. Here, an object seems yours if you have the power to make it an extension of your will, make it serve your purposes.
3. an element of sovereignty, or dominium: this is more subtle: the power over one's own possessions it implies hierarchical encompassment (that object is subsumed in one's identity), but also, ultimately implies<sup>21</sup>

The term "sovereignty" here is no mere metaphor: legally, property rights are still defined as "dominium"—exactly the same power that was once held by kings and princes and that is still retained by states in the form of "eminent domain". Even in England, which led the way

---

<sup>20</sup> In other words, rather than asking how is it possible to truly "have" or possess some object or experience, perhaps we should be asking why anyone should develop a desire to do so to begin with.

<sup>21</sup> One could make an argument it is really just a fusion between the first two.



in establishing private property law, it was almost the eighteenth century before jurists were willing to recognize a dominium belonging to anyone other than the king.

What would it mean, then, to establish “sovereignty” over an object? In legal terms, a king’s dominium extended to his land, his subjects, and their possessions; the subjects were “included in” the person of the king, who represented them in dealing with other kingdoms, in a similar fashion to that by which the father of a family represented his wife, children, and servants before the law. The wife, children, and servants of a head of household were likewise “included in” his legal personality, in much in the same way as his possessions. And in fact the power of kings was always being likened to that of fathers; the only real difference (aside from the fact that in any conflict, the king was seen to have a higher claim) was that unlike fathers, kings wielded the power of life and death over their subjects. These were the ultimate stakes of sovereignty; certainly, it was the one power kings were least willing to delegate or share.<sup>22</sup> The ultimate proof that one has sovereign power over another human being is one’s ability to have them executed. In a similar fashion, one might argue, the ultimate proof of possession, of one’s personal dominium over a thing, is one’s ability to destroy it—and indeed this remains one of the key legal ways of defining dominium, as a property right, to this day. But there’s an obvious problem here. If one does destroy the object, one may have definitively proved that one owns it; but as a result, one does not own it any more.

We end up, then, with what might seem a particularly perverse variation on Hegel’s master/slave dialectic, in which the actor, seeking some sort of impossible recognition of his absolute mastery of an inanimate object, can only achieve this recognition by destroying it. But I don’t really think this is a variation on the master/slave dilemma. I think a better case could probably be made that the dilemma described by Hegel actually derives from this. After all, the one thing least explained in Hegel’s account is where the necessity of conflict comes from (after all, there are ways to risk one’s life to impress another person that do not involve trying to kill them).<sup>23</sup> The quest for recognition, in Hegel, does not lead to the destruction of property: but it does lead to a choice of either destroying the Other, or reducing the Other to property. Relations which are not based on property—or more precisely, on that very ambiguous synthesis between the two types of sovereignty—suddenly become impossible to imagine, and I think this is true because Hegel is starting from a model of possessive individualism.

At any rate, the paradox exists, and it is precisely here where the metaphor<sup>24</sup> of “consumption” gains its appeal. Because it is the perfect resolution of this paradox—or at least, about as perfect a resolution as one is going to get. When you eat something, you do indeed destroy it (as an autonomous entity), but at the same time, you absorb it into your own being, it remains “included in” you in the most material of senses.<sup>25</sup> Eating food, then, became the perfect idiom for talking about desire and gratification in a world in which everything, all human relations, were being reimagined as questions of property.

---

<sup>22</sup> Supposedly in early Roman law the *pater familias* did have the power to execute his children, as well as his slaves; both rights if they really did exist were stripped away quite quickly...

<sup>23</sup> “Similarly, just as each stakes his own life, so each must seek the other’s death, for it values the other no more than itself; its essential being is present.

<sup>24</sup> Or more technically, I suppose, synecdoche.

<sup>25</sup> And it has the additional attraction of being almost the only power which kings do not have over their subjects: as one 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish jurist wrote, in arguing that American cannibalism violated natural law, “no man may possess another so absolutely that he may make use of him as a foodstuff” (in Pagden 1984\*\*:<sup>86</sup>)

## SACRIFICE

What we have documented so far is a conception of human fulfillment as a form of destruction and incorporation; a reconception of human beings as eating machines, absorbing elements of the world around them, burning them up or spitting them out, in a never-ending pursuit of phantasms. Probably, in the final analysis, the only way to understand all this is, as Bataille suggests, in relation to some kind of sacrificial ideology. If one were to write a complete genealogy of the idea, I suspect, one would probably best begin with the anthropological and historical literature on animal sacrifice.

Certainly, much of that literature (e.g., Leinhardt 1964; Valeri 1986) is very suggestive: at least insofar as it tends to argue that such rituals are ultimately about the creation of transcendental images, desired states through the destruction of desirable goods—goods that were also, usually, living beings—a destruction that separates the permanent image from the (now edible) remains. Only then can it end in an act of collective consumption, a feast. One might then go on to observe that Eurasian world religions from Zoroaster onwards<sup>26</sup> almost invariably seem to have arisen, in large part, in opposition to this sort of sacrificial ritual and all it represents. They were veritable anti-sacrificial ideologies. In practice, this could mean anything from utterly negating one classic form of animal sacrifice (as in Hinduism, where one was forbidden to kill cows) to inverting its logic (as in Christianity, where it was now God, as paschal lamb, who had sacrificed himself), or endless variations in between. Each tradition tended to maintain certain elements of the classic sacrificial scene for continued emphasis—the fire in Zoroastrianism, the incense in Confucianism, the altar in Christianity (Heesterman 1993)—each, significantly, was confronted in doing so with the need to develop some kind of philosophical understanding of human desire. The Medieval European one which we have been exploring in this essay, however superficially, might be considered one particular variation, developed in dialogue between the Jewish, Christian and Muslim intellectual cultures of the time; a rather different, but in many ways more sophisticated, approach to the same existential problems developed in a parallel dialogue between Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism; or more interestingly, even, between different strains of Buddhism or otherwise within those traditions themselves.

## CONCLUSIONS: BUT WHAT ABOUT CONSUMERISM?

So where does this get us in relation to the question with which we began: rethinking the usefulness of the term “consumption”?

What does all this mean for the way we talk about ‘consumption’ now? For starters, I think it means we should think about how far we want to extend the metaphor—because a metaphor is, after all, what we are dealing with here. It makes perfect sense to talk about the “consumption” of fossil fuels. It is quite another thing to talk about the “consumption” of television programming—much though this has been the topic of endless books and essays. Why, exactly, are we calling this “consumption”? About the only reason I can see is that TV programming is created by people paid wages and salaries somewhere other than where viewers are watching it. Otherwise, there appears to be no reason at all. Programming is not even a commodity, since viewers don’t usually pay for it; it is not in any direct sense “consumed” by its viewers. It is hardly something one fan-

---

<sup>26</sup> “Axial age” religions as they’re often called.

tasizes about acquiring, and one cannot, in fact, acquire it. It is no sense destroyed by use. Rather, we are dealing with a continual stream of potential fantasy material, some intended to market particular commodities, some not. Cultural studies scholars, and anthropologists writing in the same vein, tend to insist that these images are not simply passively absorbed by “consumers”, but actively interpreted and appropriated, in ways the producers would probably never have suspected, and employed as ways of fashioning identities. Once again, the “creative consumption” model. But to how much TV watching does this really apply? Certainly, there’s some. There are people who organize much of their imaginative life around one particular show, Trekkies for instance, who participate in a subculture of fans who write stories or comic zines around their favorite characters, attend conventions, design costumes and the like (XXX). But when a sixteen year old girl writes a short story about forbidden love between Kirk and Spock, or some such, this is hardly consumption any more; we are talking about people engaging in a complex community organized around forms of (relatively unalienated) production. Such behavior tends to be typical of people who have a good deal of time on their hands, and a great deal of energy.<sup>27</sup> At the other extreme, we have the vast majority of TV viewing, which is by people who spend most of their waking hours engaged in extremely alienated forms of production—who work forty or fifty hours a week at a job that is likely as not mind-numbingly boring, extremely stressful, or both; commute; come home far too exhausted and emotionally drained to be able to engage in any of the activities they would consider truly rewarding, pleasurable or meaningful, but just plop down in front of the tube because it’s the easiest thing to do. As some have noted, (e.g. Lodziak 2002) those who analyze consumption as an autonomous domain of meaning creation almost never take the effects of work into account.

In other words, when “creative consumption” is at its most creative, it’s not consumption; when it’s most obviously a form of consumption, it is not creative.

The first step in trying to reimagine our existence, then, is to temporarily suspend the Political Economy habit of seeing society as divided into two spheres, of production and consumption (or at best three: production, consumption, and exchange); a habit which necessarily forces us to view almost all forms of non-alienated production as ‘consumer behavior’.

Here’s a typical quote:

Cooking, playing sports, gardening, DIY (Do-It-Yourself), home decoration, dancing and music-making are all examples of consumer activities which involve some participation, but they cannot of themselves transform the major invasion by commercial interest groups into consumption which has occurred since the 1950s (Bocock 1993:51).

We are back to the example of teenagers and the rock band. If someone kicked a ball around, or played the guitar, or rearranged their room before the Industrial Revolution, were they really engaging in a fundamentally different activity than when someone who did the same thing using mass-produced products a century later? According to this logic, if I bought some vegetables and cooked a ratatui to share with some friends, that would actually fall within the domain of consumption. In fact, according to the above quote, even if I grew the vegetables myself, that would too, because gardening, apparently, is also a form of consumerism. In other words, we

---

<sup>27</sup> As, incidentally, do those people from other cultures who radically reinterpret TV shows, so much beloved of anthropological media theorists....

are categorizing all non-alienated forms of production as consumption, which has the incredibly reactionary political effect of treating almost all every form of unalienated experience we do engage in as somehow a gift granted us by the captains of industry.

So what to do? This paper is meant to raise issues, trace a history, and expose dilemmas, more than to suggest one necessary way out. Probably there are all sorts of ways out of this particular box. Still, I can make a few suggestions. First of all, why not limit the use of the term “consumption” to either situations where something actually is being consumed, or else ones which are so deeply implicated in the ideology I’ve been describing here that we can be fairly confident it informs the actors’ own tacit understandings of the matter—which is another way of saying, let’s not just assume it always does. There probably are people out there who really do base key aspects of their identity around what they see as the destructive encompassment of certain sorts of products, but let us think about who these people really are and how they relate to others who do not. Insofar as we are going to continue working in with Marxist terms—and I must admit I find many of them extremely useful—I think we should start looking at what we’ve been calling the ‘consumption’ sphere rather as the sphere of the production of human beings, not just as labor power but as persons, internalized nexus of meaningful social relations, since, after all, this is what social life is actually about, the production of people (of which the production of things is simply a subordinate moment), and it’s only the very unusual organization of capitalism that makes it even possible for us to imagine otherwise. This is not to say that everything has to be considered either a form of production or of consumption (consider for example a softball game) but it at least allows us to open up some neglected questions, such as that of alienated and nonalienated forms of labor, terms which have somewhat fallen into abeyance and therefore remain radically undertheorized. What exactly does engaging in nonalienated production actually mean? Such questions become all the more important when we start thinking about capitalist globalization and resistance. Rather than looking at poor people in the global South and saying “look! they are using consumption to construct identities!”, and thus implying they are willingly, or perhaps unknowingly, submitting to the logic of neoliberal capitalism, perhaps we should consider that in many of these societies, the production of material products has always been subordinate to the mutual construction of human beings and what they are doing, at least in part, is simply insisting on continuing to act this way. In other words, maybe it is the very opposite of acquiescence.

But one thing I think we can certainly assert. Insofar as social life is and always has been mainly about the mutual construction of human beings, the ideology of consumption has been endlessly effective in helping us forget this. Most of all it does so by suggesting that:

- a. human desire is essentially as a matter of a relation between individuals and phantasms;
- b. our primarily relation with other individuals, then, becomes an endless struggle to establish their sovereignty, or autonomy, by incorporating and destroying aspects of the world around them
- c. this logic ultimately becomes the basis for ways of imagining the very possibility of relations with other people (the problem of “the Other”)
- d. materially, it becomes the basis for imagining society as a gigantic engine of production and destruction in which the only significant human activity is either manufacturing things,

or engaging in acts of ceremonial destruction so as to make way for more: a vision which in fact sidelines most things that real people actually do and insofar as it is translated into actual economic behavior, is obviously unsustainable

Even as anthropologists and other social theorists directly challenge this view of the world, the unreflective use and indeed propagation of terms like “consumption” ends up completely undercutting their efforts and reproducing exactly the tacit ideological logic we would wish to undercut.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)  
Anti-Copyright



David Graeber  
The Very Idea of Consumption  
Desire, phantasms, and the aesthetics of destruction in Western society  
2002

Retrieved on 28<sup>th</sup> November 2021 from [davidgraeber.org](http://davidgraeber.org)

[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)