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ARTICLE

# New Faces and New Masks of Today's Consumer

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### *Abstract*

In 1995, we proposed that consumption and contemporary consumerism could not be studied or understood separately from the world of work and production. We proposed that contemporary consumerism was built on the back of what we referred to as 'the Fordist Deal'. This deal, pioneered by Henry Ford for his employees, was the promise of *ever increasing standards of living in exchange for a quiescent labour force accepting alienating work*. Since that deal was struck, consumerism came to signify a general pre-occupation with consumption standards and choice as well as a willingness to read meanings in material commodities and to equate happiness and success with material possessions. In this sense, Ford may be seen as the father both of mass production and mass consumption. Since the Fordist high noon of consumerism in the West, mass consumption is widely seen as having fragmented into a proliferation of highly individualized niche products. For its part, a considerable part of mass production has migrated to countries with lower wages and looser environmental and social controls, fueling their own variants of consumerism. In this article, we examine the gradual erosion of the Fordist Deal in the light of developments in the last 10 years or so, seeking to assess the future of consumerism at a global level. We also seek to identify and discuss some emerging conceptualizations of the consumer, some of the new faces and masks assumed by the archetypal character of our types. We analyse some of the tensions and contradictions lurking behind these conceptualizations and try to envisage some of the real choices facing consumers today and some of the processes of social change that hinge on the outcomes of these choices. The article identifies a

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fundamental paradox between the ubiquity of the consumer in contemporary discourses and the virtual impossibility of generalizing about consumers. We suggest, then, that the consumer may be viewed as one of those 'essentially contested concepts' proposed by Gallie that defy domestication. The consumer, we argue, is unmanageable, both as a concept, since no-one can pin it down to one specific conceptualization at the expense of all others, and as an entity, since attempts to control and manage the consumer lead to the consumer mutating from one impersonation to another. It is precisely this paradox that we seek to capture in our article's title. The article concludes with a consideration of three basic challenges that are liable to lead to fundamental reorientation of consumption and production, as well as of our conceptualizations and theorizing about them. These challenges are the outcomes of environmental, demographic and social factors that, we argue, make the current situation unsustainable and will bring about its dissolution.

*Key words*

Fordist Deal • consumer choice • challenges and limits to consumerism

## NEW FACES AND NEW MASKS OF TODAY'S CONSUMER<sup>1</sup>

In the last 10 or 20 years, the consumer has become the focus of extensive debates in many human sciences, including economics, sociology, psychology, cultural studies, and so forth. Everywhere, it seems, the consumer is triumphant. Consumers are said to dictate production; to fuel innovation; to be creating new service sectors in advanced economies; to be driving modern politics; to have it in their power to save the environment and protect the future of the planet. Consumers embody a simple modern logic, the right to choose. Choice, the consumer's friend, the inefficient producer's foe, can be applied to things as diverse as soap-powder, holidays, healthcare or politicians. And yet the consumer is also seen as a weak and malleable creature, easily manipulated, dependent, passive and foolish. Immersed in illusions, addicted to joyless pursuits and in spite of ever-increasing living standards, the consumer, far from being god, is a pawn, in games played in invisible boardrooms.

The consumer also sits at the centre of numerous policy debates. Policy makers, marketers, politicians, environmentalists, lobbyists and journalists rarely lose the consumer from their sights. The supermarket has become a metaphor for our age; choice, its consumerist mantra. A new way of thinking and talking about people has emerged, which engulfs all of us, and is ardently embraced by the mass media. By the beginning of the 21st century, we have learnt to talk and think of each other and of ourselves less as workers, citizens, parents or teachers, and more as consumers. Our rights and our powers derive from our standing as consumers; our political choices are votes for those promising us the best deal as consumers; our

enjoyment of life is almost synonymous with the quantities (and to a lesser extent qualities) of what we consume. Our success is measured in terms of how well we are doing as consumers. Consumption is not just a means of fulfilling needs but permeates our social relations, identities, perceptions and images.

In 1995, we proposed that consumption and contemporary consumerism could not be studied or understood separately from the world of work and production. We proposed that contemporary consumerism was built on the back of what we referred to as 'the Fordist Deal' (Gabriel and Lang, 1995). This deal, pioneered by Henry Ford for his employees, was the promise of *ever increasing standards of living in exchange for a quiescent labour force accepting alienating work*. Ford offered his workforce the carrot of material enjoyment outside the workplace as compensation for the deskilling, control and alienation that he imposed in the workplace. He also recognized the potential of his workers as customers, once they rose above mere subsistence. 'If you cut wages, you just cut the number of your customers' (Barnet and Cavanagh, 1994: 261). Of course, the deal assumed different forms in different industries and different countries – more extreme in the US, extreme in countries with long traditions of social democracy. The deal was also resisted, actively and passively, by many groups of workers in different contexts. What is remarkable, however, is that in spite of variations in the way the Fordist Deal was implemented, consumerism as a general preoccupation with consumption standards and choice established itself as a dominant outlook throughout the 20th century in many countries and continues to do so today. Consumerism entails a willingness to read meanings in material commodities and to equate happiness and success with material possessions (Lebergott, 1993). In this sense, Ford may be seen as the father both of mass production and mass consumption. He is often credited with being the father of the former, but rarely of the latter.

The last 13 years have seen extraordinary social and economic changes that have reframed the nature of consumption world-wide (Trentmann, 2005). The emergence of China, India and other developing countries as huge consumer markets and producer hotspots has extended the reach of contemporary consumerism. Political realignments worldwide have spawned new outposts of consumption and new black holes of deprivation while generalized uncertainty has tempered some consumers' appetites. Major technological innovations, notably the internet, have turned many homes into retail outposts while digital photography and MP3 players have revolutionized patterns of consuming images and music. Education and health provisions have become yet more commodified, with

students and patients viewing themselves as consumers. At the same time, anti-globalization movements with an anti-consumption message have, at times, assumed centre-stage of politics, offering at least a glimpse of opposition to mainstream consumer capitalism. Islamist ideology has made much of the decadence and spiritual impoverishment of the materialist West. Overall, the last 13 years have seen a substantial expansion of consumerism into new areas, countries and homes, and an escalation of potential checks from environmental and political uncertainties. Everywhere, the core value of consumerism – choice – is apparent (Levett et al., 2003).

In the same period, academic writing on consumption and the accompanying fetishization of the consumer has sky-rocketed in new consumer-oriented journals and books. Cultural studies have dissected shopping malls as cathedrals of consumption and students of organization have focused on the limits of the ethos of customer service. Identity construction has come to be viewed increasingly through the prism of lifestyles. Choice, modelled on the affluent consumer experience, has become the central tenet of many political and ethical discourses. At the same time, there is an increasing awareness among some academics of the ecological limits to the consumerist orgy, which are already alarming observers of climate change, raw materials and natural resources such as soil, water and air. In addition, there is the continuing sore of billions of people subsisting at a level of bare survival. And finally, the expectation of steady, well-paid, even if alienating jobs has become unrealistic for ever-increasing numbers of people in industrialized and industrializing countries.

Mass consumption is now widely seen as having fragmented into a proliferation of highly individualized niche products. For its part, a considerable part of mass production has migrated to countries with lower wages and looser environmental and social controls, fuelling their own variants of consumerism. In this article, we examine the gradual erosion of the Fordist Deal in the light of developments in the last 13 years or so, seeking to assess the future of consumerism at a global level. We consider some of the social factors that have contributed to this erosion, notably casualization of work, demographic trends leading to aging populations in the industrialized countries, new consumption patterns deriving from technological innovations and the emergence of a new politics of identity diluting long-established class-based politics. We examine how relations between production and consumption have been affected by globalization and the emergence of an informational capitalism where much of what is produced and traded assumes non-material forms. We acknowledge the

current importance of narrative knowledge in a society saturated by information and explore how this type of knowledge contained in stories and personal experiences influences the actions and choices of consumers. We argue, however, that the main currency of informational capitalism is not narrative but image. Using some of the arguments of Ritzer, Bauman and others, we argue that image fundamentally alters both work and consumption experiences, leading to a highlighting of aesthetic values and a dislocation of conventional considerations of value and service. Appearance and emotional tone become central. The article identifies a fundamental paradox between the ubiquity of the consumer in contemporary discourses and the virtual impossibility of generalizing about consumers. We suggest then that the consumer may be viewed as one of those 'essentially contested concepts' proposed by Gallie (1964) that defy domestication. The consumer, we argue, is unmanageable, both as a concept, since no one can pin it down to one specific conceptualization at the expense of all others, and as an entity, since attempts to control and manage the consumer lead to the consumer mutating from one impersonation to another. It is precisely this paradox that we seek to capture in our article's title.

Our article concludes with a consideration of three basic challenges that are liable to lead to fundamental reorientation of consumption and production, as well as of our conceptualizations and theorizing about them. These challenges are the outcomes of environmental, demographic and social factors that, we argue, make the current situation unsustainable and will bring about its dissolution.

### THE FORDIST DEAL AND ITS AFTERMATH

The Fordist Deal is currently unravelling under pressure from multiple directions that affect production as deeply as consumption. New technologies enable the easy relocation of jobs and transfer of information, resulting in a wide-ranging restructuring of the international division of labour – who makes what, where and how. The concept of a 'job for life' in much of the industrialized West, to say nothing of the formerly centrally planned economies of the Communist block have virtually lost meaning (Sennett, 1998; Gabriel, 2005). Instead, many jobs have become casualized and careers have become fragmented – rapid job moves, being constantly on the lookout for better opportunities and work prospects; frenetic periods of work on specific projects followed by almost certain periods of self-employment or under-employment (Heery and Salmon, 2000; Bunting, 2004). Casualization does not necessarily mean unemployment; on the contrary, it implies impermanence in work as the new benchmark. Indeed, vast new

opportunities of employment have been created in the service sectors, involving either the manipulation of symbols on screens and the clicking of computer mice, or alternatively front-line work with customers in hospitality, entertainment, retail, sport and tourist sectors. In many of them, emotional and aesthetic labour have assumed major importance, accounting for much of the consumption experience (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Ritzer, 1998; Tyler and Taylor, 1998; Hancock and Tyler, 2000; Warhurst et al., 2000; Korczynski, 2003; Witz et al., 2003).

The Fordist Deal is also unravelling as a result of deep-rooted changes in consumption patterns. In most countries, consumers are becoming younger; and, as a result of demographic pressures and healthcare, they are becoming older. The reach of the Fordist Deal is weakened by this demographic cultural shift. New areas of consumption, such as education, health (including fertility and voluntary euthanasia), the voluntary and not-for-profit sector and transport, are rapidly being colonized by a consumer ethos of choice and identity politics. New parts of the world are seized by the excitement of consumerism. New forms of resistance are making themselves felt, ranging from music piracy to anti-globalization and environmental protests, from fundamentalist and militant religious resurgence to economic downshifting and career moratoriums. New vulnerabilities such as internet crime and identity theft are added to enduring old ones, such as terrorism and fraud. Consumerism may absorb or co-opt some of these challenges, though, in the longer run, the challenges posed by ecological and demographic factors leave no doubt about troubled times ahead or even coming crises.

If the comfortable co-habitation of mass consumption and mass production that characterized the Fordist Deal appears to be coming to an end, production and consumption continue to be tied together, neither determining the other but in constant and mutual definition. The original tight linkage between production and consumption is not necessarily lost, but certainly weakened. Understanding consumption still requires that we understand production, and understanding production requires that we understand consumption. This is not a new insight. A century and a half ago, Marx was keenly aware that production and consumption cannot be separated: 'Without production, no consumption; but also, without consumption, no production' (Marx, 1993[1859]). Every form of production involves the consumption of resources and every type of consumption results in some production, even if only waste. But, consumption is also *work* – it requires patient or breathless searches through high-streets, shopping malls or internet sites; it involves minuscule comparisons and

painstaking choices; it demands continuous updating and vigilance. Some consumption, such as working out in a gym or reading a book is almost just *work*. By the same token, a great deal of consumption, including corporate hospitality and corporate travel, takes place while we are notionally *at work*.

Part of what ties consumption and production together is the new politics of meaning and identity (Du Gay, 1996). Meaning and identity are not fashioned solely in the realm of consumption as some theorists of postmodernity have argued, but emerge through what is referred to as lifestyle choices – loosely connected sets of tastes, behaviours, ideas and values (Gershuny, 1988; Chaney, 1996). These lifestyles may entail coherence in work, leisure and home, or may entail dissonances and discontinuities. The holiday, that lifestyle emblem, may complement work, home and income or, equally, may be extravagantly out of tune with them. Under the regime of the Fordist Deal, identity and meaning were tied to one's work and one's living standards as enabled by their working situation, themselves the product of class position (Sennett, 1998). Today, by contrast, identity and meaning are more fluid, tentative and inconsistent – choice has made such inconsistencies possible.

## GLOBALIZATION

If Henry Ford's assembly lines represented the kernel of the Fordist Deal, today's interdependence of consumption and production may best be observed in the call centre (Frenkel et al., 1999; Sturdy et al., 2001; Korczynski, 2001b; Korczynski, 2003), late modernity's answer to those satanic mills of early industrialization. In the Indian call centre servicing customers in Toronto and Manchester at all times of the day and night, we find many of the contemporary global interconnections between production and consumption. The consumer, that reputed sovereign, stuck to his or her telephone in New York, cursing the umpteenth return of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* while being put on hold, waiting to buy a railway ticket to the suburbs through a busy call centre located somewhere in Bangalore. And the worker at the call centre, a member of the local consumer aristocracy in his or her own right, servicing a global clientele, caught between a relentless pressure for 'orders taken' and a much drummed requirement to offer a quality, personalized service with the telephone equivalent of a smile.

A closer look at the inter-relations of production and consumption, however, suggests that the call centre falls short of embodying all the complexities of this relationship. While some of what is traded today is still goods and services, an increasing proportion is information itself. This lies

at the heart of what Castells memorably called the new 'informational capitalism' (Castells, 1996; Castells, 1997; Castells, 1998); the productivity and competitiveness of different economic units, such as firms, countries or trading networks lies in their ability to handle, process and manage information and knowledge. Crucial for this capitalism is the free flow of information across networks of economic agents, a flexible workforce, capable of working around the clock, when and as required. The very concept of a job, argues Castells and others, is replaced by what he terms *self-programmable labour*, in which the stock of knowledge and information in the minds of workers is constantly expanded and modified throughout their working lives. Work, then, becomes tantamount to learning or more specifically learning how to learn or being prepared to learn. In an economy changing at internet speed, specific information and knowledge becomes obsolete in a few years, a few months or even a few days. What becomes essential is the ability to transform generic information into specific knowledge to be applied in concrete situations (Castells, 2001: 90) and always ready to engage with and understand the new.

When thinking of information, most commentators envisage reams of spreadsheets, astronomical sequences of digitized figures on computer memories – in short, data on every conceivable detail of social, personal and economic life. Undoubtedly, we live in a society drowning in such information, a society in which the ability to navigate in shortcuts, around the endless detours of mostly useless information, accords individuals, organizations and networks considerable power. Some authors (Brown and Duguid, 1994; Orr, 1996; Gherardi et al., 1998; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, 2000; Tsoukas, 2002) have sought to defend narrative knowledge, the knowledge stored in stories, anecdotes and narratives, as precisely such shortcutting knowledge, knowledge developed and shared creatively by what are currently referred to as 'communities of practice'. Whether a medical practitioner, an advertising executive, an airline pilot, a stock-broker, a midwife or a traveling salesperson, you realize that some of the most valuable information is not contained in books, manuals and computer programmes of your trade but in the stories and narratives you exchange informally with people on your wavelength, people who share your assumptions, interests and problems (Gabriel, 2000; Gabriel, 2002). A telling story may shortcut through swathes of information, supplying the idea behind a quick, relevant and appropriate solution.

Narrative knowledge can also supply much of value to consumers of all kinds of products and services. The experience of those who had plastic surgery in a particular clinic, the stories they tell about the staff, the pain

endured and the eventual success of their treatment may be decisive in whether a potential customer decides to avail of the clinic's service, or indeed to have the treatment at all. The stories of owners or users of particular objects, ranging from books, music, mobile telephony, and so forth can now be easily found in the internet. Amazon, apart from everything else, offers a prospective customer a wonderful opportunity to sample what they are about to purchase and also to read the stories of those who have purchased it before. In this sense, at least, the internet has created a type of knowledge that is quite distinct from the ones and zeroes on those spreadsheets. It has led to some consumer empowerment – consumers swap stories about goods and services they purchased and are in a position to make more meaningful, if not better 'informed' choices.

### SOCIETY OF IMAGE?

Arguably more important than narrative in our society is image. Image would appear to be the main currency of informational capitalism. Ours is more a society of visual representations, images, spectacles and shows. Our daily universe has become saturated with images, jumping at us from our television sets, our magazines and newspapers, our computer screens and our digital cameras, advertising billboards and shop windows. We are bombarded by Microsoft® PowerPoint® presentations, a template for presenting ideas that marginalizes finely turned arguments and analysis. As image replaces words, pithiness replaces subtlety. Shops and malls, the cathedrals of consumption, are minutely engineered mega-shows meant, to stimulate and delight the eye, to whet appetites and to excite emotions. Saturated by images, most of us have given up trying to fit them into stories and have learnt to accept them as spectacle pure and simple, pleasing or annoying, evoking, prompting, comforting, upsetting, entertaining or irritating.

The idea that we live in an era saturated by spectacle where image reigns supreme is of course not new. Parodying Marx, Guy Debord opened his 1960s situationist manifesto with:

In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation. (Debord, 1977: paragraph 1)

Allowing for the obvious hyperbole, Debord's premise seems to be even more powerful today than in the 1960s when he made it the basis of his then fringe and latterly more fashionable if edgy critique (Debord, 1977).

Numerous theorists, including Bauman, Ritzer and Baudrillard, have since argued that spectacle has become the primary type of experience in late modernity, dominating every aspect of our public and private lives. Spectacle liquefies most forms of social exchange, colonizing politics, sport, religion and education. The society of spectacle probably reaches its apotheosis in the Olympics, a truly global brand that lands on earth every four years. What has changed since the situationist critique is the more nuanced evaluation that we accord spectacle today, the less unequivocal equation of spectacle with passivity and stupefaction. Thus, inspired by Bauman, Ritzer (1999) has argued that spectacle has led to a re-enchantment of the world in late modernity's cathedrals of consumption. Shopping malls, glass buildings, tourist resorts, sports venues and theme parks are all minutely planned and orchestrated shows, with spectators themselves becoming part of the display. Immense amounts of money are spent on advertising and packaging, films and television shows, magazines and printed images. Politics, education, sport, religion, charity, journalism, to say nothing of the entertainment and leisure sectors become dominated by spectacle. Spectacle becomes the archetypal experience of our time, they argue, offering 'the promise of new, overwhelming, mind-boggling or spine-chilling, but always exhilarating experience' (Bauman, 1997: 181).

According to this view, we are now deep in the era of spectacle. It is estimated that in 2004, 28 billion digital pictures were taken in the USA alone. The figure is likely to continue rising exponentially as life gets lived as a series of photo-opportunities and consumption becomes substantially a consumption of images or a consumption for the benefit of generating images. The media are themselves inviting the public to amplify this process by submitting their own digital images of events ranging from pop festivals to tsunamis and from everyday crime to terrorist outrages. The media themselves produce a constant sequence of images that create, as Boorstin (1962) understood before Debord or Baudrillard, illusions of reality, swamping us with images and pictures. Our consciousness is now saturated with image and our memories are to a large extent visual ones. As Susan Sontag put it succinctly, following the publication of the horrendous images of prisoner abuse from the Abu Ghraib prison camp in Iraq:

The memory museum is now mostly a visual one. Photographs have an insuperable power to determine what people recall of events. . . . To live is to be photographed, to have a record of one's life, and therefore, to go on with one's life, oblivious, or

claiming to be oblivious, to the camera's non-stop attentions. But it is also to pose. To act is to share in the community of actions recorded as images. . . . Events are in part designed to be photographed. (Sontag, 2004)

Under the regime of the Fordist Deal, automobiles symbolized the link between production and consumption. The product of hard manual labour, the automobile captured the aspirations of the affluent working classes, promising freedom, mobility, speed, style and comfort. By contrast, in a society dominated by image, labour assumes aesthetic and emotional qualities, previously only available to the super-rich. Looking smart and sounding right are qualities every bit as important in getting a job in the new service economy, over and above physical strength or formal qualifications and cognitive competences. The notion of emotional intelligence has emerged as the way of capturing and commodifying these aptitudes (Goleman, 1996; Fineman, 2000).

If image, including the employees' looks, the buildings, clothes, logos, and atmosphere, now permeates production, it totally saturates consumption. The most mundane or innocuous object or service can be beautified to make it an object of desire. The aestheticisation of every day life, as epitomized by Italy's love affair with style (*bello stile*), becomes an end in itself (Calinescu, 1987; Featherstone, 1991; Postrel, 2003). Price and costings incorporate this new 'take' on what is meant by value.

## UNMANAGEABILITY AND THE CONSUMER

Alongside the emergence of this society of image, older and starker characteristics still remain. Inequalities among consumers are already sharp, leaving substantial numbers of them window-shopping with only restricted opportunities to make a purchase and many, in the developing countries, without even windows to window-shop. This is contributing to the fragmentation of consumers' experiences. While some consumers throughout the world may spend inordinate amounts of time deliberating whether to invest in a new swimming-pool, a new car or a second home abroad, others have to choose between feeding their children or buying them a new pair of shoes. Those inequalities occur within, not just between, societies. Given such social chasms, it is difficult to talk about *all* consumption and *all* consumers as coming under the same ethos or constraints, i.e. as being uniform entities or acting as a unified force. The fragmentation of images of consumption is itself a symptom of the malaise of contemporary consumerism and a fragmentation of the concept of the consumer.

In 1995, *The Unmanageable Consumer* argued that the Fordist Deal was weakening and suggested that western consumerism may have entered a twilight phase. During the high noon of consumerism in the latter half of the 20th century, we argued, the face of the consumer was clear, as was the significance of his or her every movement. The pursuit of happiness through consumption seemed a plausible, if morally questionable, social and personal project. Today, that analysis is inadequate. The economic conditions have become more fraught, the social inequalities have widened further, insecurity is experienced on a massive scale. Cultural fatigue threatens to overcome even the well-off, raising questions of pursuing simpler lives and spiritual and community values. The Fordist Deal can no longer promise happiness; it may be on the way to becoming a museum piece, pushed from its once iconic status by new cultural awareness, certainly by economic restructuring (Layard, 2005).

When we surveyed the consumption landscape 13 years ago, we were unsure about the future of consumerism and we felt that it was open. In the intervening period, the implications of several factors have become more salient. Key among them are the continuing expansion of consumerism to different parts of the globe and different areas of social life; the increasing domination of image and spectacle; the pursuit of meaning through consumption; enduring global inequalities; emerging new forms of activism and resistance; and continuing casualization of work and consumption.

It is now clear that casualization of work is accompanied by casualization of consumption. People lead precarious and uneven existences, one day enjoying unexpected boons and the next feeling overwhelmed by insecurity and debt. Precariousness, unevenness and fragmentation will continue to characterize western life prospects. Marginality has paradoxically become central. The notion of an average consumer has become a fiction. In a world where everyone claims the consumer for her- or himself, the consumer must now be deemed *unmanageable*, claimed by many, but controlled by nobody, least of all by consumers themselves. In a paper delivered to the Aristotelian Society in 1956, the philosopher Walter Bryce Gallie (1964) argued that certain concepts defy domestication within particular discourse or traditions; they acquire many diverse meanings depending on who uses them and in what context. Such, he argued, was the fate of words like 'art' or 'fairness'. These, he termed 'essentially contested concepts' in order to facilitate an understanding of different applications or interpretations, without seeking to adjudicate between 'right' and 'wrong' usages. Essentially contested concepts cannot be

controlled or managed. This, it seems to us, is exactly what has happened to the term 'consumer' – it has become an essentially contested concept. The consumer, then, is unmanageable, both as a concept, since no-one can pin it down to one specific conceptualization at the expense of all others, and as an entity, since attempts to control and manage the consumer result in a mutation from a stable consumer concept to an unstable one.

The notion of unmanageability seems to us to be entirely appropriate for an era where the capacity to plan must give way to opportunism, living for the present. Deeming the consumers to be unmanageable does not mean that vast resources are not expended in seeking to control them, cajole them, predict and mould their behaviour and consciousness. Vast amounts of information is collected at the point of sale, the point of thinking about a purchase, in order to make consumers appear predictable and amenable to typologies of marketing efforts. And yet, the best attempts at managing consumers easily comes undone, as when a fad or a fashion seizes their imagination and, just as quickly, goes. Even as they are constantly typecast and pigeon-holed, consumers are becoming more unmanageable, eccentric and paradoxical.

The argument, then, is that, like today's producers, today's consumers (after all, even in a globalized division of labour they are often the same people) must rely on opportunism, and seeking to be in the right place at the right times. As Bauman has argued:

In the life-game of the postmodern consumers the rules of the game keep changing in the course of playing. The sensible strategy is therefore to keep each game short – so that a sensibly played game of life calls for the splitting of one big all-embracing game with huge stakes into a series of brief and narrow games with small ones. . . . To keep the game short means to beware long-term commitments. To refuse to be 'fixed' one way or the other. Not to get tied to the place. Not to wed one's life to one vocation only. Not to swear consistency and loyalty to anything and anybody. Not to *control* the future, but to *refuse to mortgage* it: to take care that the consequences of the game do not outlive the past to bear on the present. (Bauman, 1996: 24)

To retailers and producers of goods and services, this unmanageability may not be a terminal difficulty and for some, it may represent an opportunity. So long as a certain proportion of the population at any one time is in a position to spend, there will be markets, and entrepreneurs will discover

opportunities to capitalize on people's desire to celebrate and enjoy themselves. After all, the opportunism of consumers is matched by the opportunism of business. To other consumers, however, a future based on mortgages, careful husbanding of resources and long-term financial commitments could become routine. Within someone's life, periods of both of these experiences are likely to feature, periods of both feast and famine.

Market researchers and the agents of production endlessly pursue the Holy Grail of control, seeking to anticipate consumer trends on behalf of capital, which stands to gain massively from accurate predictions, coupled with investment in attempts to shape or tempt consumption to its benefit. The task of those who seek to anticipate trends is inevitably partisan, their goal to mould the future to their ends.

But planning a future for the consumer is one thing, delivering it is another. Even at the mundane level of anticipating what objects will be popular in the future, prognostication is fraught with danger. The history of consumption is full of dead-ends. Products that pundits were once sure would become objects of mass consumption and desire in the future now stand as quaint reminders of the pitfalls of futurology. In the 1960s, for instance, the merchants of tomorrow's world were offering us throw-away paper clothes, holidays on the moon, living in geodesic domes, eating food in tablet form, undertaking less work. In practice today, precious few houses are in dome form; there has been a meteoric rise in nutritional supplements but only in addition to more 'ordinary' food; no-one has been to the moon since the time of the first landings; mountains of paper are thrown away – despite the 'paperlessness' promised by the age of the electronic office – but not after being worn by human bodies; and people who are in work often work harder and longer. The future of the 1960s failed to materialize, in more senses than one. Equally, we suspect, the future as envisaged by today's brave prognosticators has more to do with their own fantasies and wishes than future facts.

There is a disparity, however, between the fantasies of industrialists and retailers and those of consumers themselves. The former ever dream of managing consumers, while the latter's dreams make them ever unmanageable. The former seek to put their vision into practice; the latter subvert, refuse, accept, interpret, surrender or embrace. Consumers have proven that in spite of the best efforts to constrain, control and manipulate them, they can act in ways that are unpredictable, inconsistent and contrary.

## THE FUTURE(S)

If, as we have just argued, on the one hand, unpredictability, inconsistency and contrariness all characterize today's consumption, on the other hand, governments persist in their policy of 'business as usual', by which well-being is equated to ever-higher national income and higher spending power. Public discourses are dominated by the discipline of economics, economic forecasts and narrow conceptions of value and utility. Faith in the market as the mechanism that will deliver this higher standard of living is undiminished in the world's power elite (expressed in G8, Davos and International Chamber of Commerce communiqués), even if it is being more openly contested by some critics and some oppositional movements (exemplified by global movements pushing for fair trade or poverty elimination). An increasing number of voices is heard arguing that environmental, demographic and social factors will combine in the longer term to undermine this conception of well-being as increased wealth. GDP, they cry, is no longer the right indicator of progress in an era where the challenge to meet planetary sustainability looms large.

The environmental challenge to consumerism is now clear to almost all thinking people. The evidence is very strong for coming shortages of key resources that have underpinned the consumerist expansion of the 20th century. These include oil, water, land, soil, clean air and minerals (Lang and Heasman, 2004; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (Program), 2005). Without these, even an information-based economy cannot be delivered and some forward-thinking companies are preparing exit strategies or technical fixes to leave the present mode of production and to experiment with alternative modes. The success of such strategies should not be relied upon; nor should they be dismissed out of hand. Even tougher environmental challenges are already apparent. The most significant of these is undoubtedly climate change, which heralds dramatic discontinuities and ruptures in the current form of consumption. Pollution, waste and desertification are also looming.

The demographic challenge is likely to prove as severe and politically unsettling. The world population passed 6 billion at the beginning of the 21st century, and is predicted by the United Nations Population Fund to rise to 9–10 billion by 2050. Feeding, housing and providing water for such escalating demands would be awesome enough across centuries. But these problems will be exacerbated by the environmental problems noted above and by the demographic disequilibria created by aging populations of most industrialized countries, alongside the youthfulness of other countries. The combination of environmental and demographic factors have led some

pessimistic theorists to speculate that social unrest, disease and warfare will reach unprecedented scale in the longer term. Optimists, on the other hand, argue that, as ever, the problem is not absolute numbers of people and production, but relative inequalities and distribution of public goods within and across those populations.

In the last resort, however, even environmental and demographic factors are mediated by social and cultural forces. It is people, after all, who consume, people who aspire and people who can make a difference. There is increasing evidence that decades of consumerism have not delivered unequivocal happiness and have created discontents of their own. Mental illness, family dislocation and the enduring social inequalities are in themselves measures of the failure of consumerism to fulfil its promise of pleasure for all. Happiness, some people come to believe, is not a destination to travel towards, but a way of travelling. Speaking at the peak of the Fordist Deal in the USA, Robert F. Kennedy, then running for President and shortly before his assassination, captured the limitations of equating consumption as measured by gross national product with social well-being in a speech at the University of Kansas:

For too long we seem to have surrendered personal excellence and community value in the mere accumulation of material things. Our gross national product now is over 800 billion dollars a year, but that gross national product, if we judge the United States of America by that, that gross national product counts air pollution, and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for people who break them. It counts the destruction of the redwoods and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic squall. It counts Napalm, and it counts nuclear warheads, and armored cars for the police to fight the riots in our city. It counts Whitman's rifles and Speck's Knives and the television programs which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children. Yet, the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages; the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage; neither our wisdom nor our learning; neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country; it measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile. (Kennedy, 1968)

Forty years ago, a leading politician such as Robert Kennedy could see clearly the limits of consumerism for the richest consumer society in the world. Today, as the Fordist Deal unravels even as more nations are sucked into its legacy, leaving us with a far more fragile promise of happiness and a far greater burden for future generations, there are more people, across nations who have started to share his concerns and foreboding. It remains to be seen whether these concerns will find organized expression in new popular movements or in a political will to bring about genuine social change, or whether change to modern consumerist patterns will be shaken by external shocks to the system. Serious candidates for this role over coming years include: energy crises (Leggett, 2005), climate change (Stern and Great Britain, Treasury, 2006), geo-political instability (Ferguson, 2006) and what the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has called 'the disorderly unwinding of global [financial] imbalances' (IMF, 2006). It is not without reason that think-tanks and forecasters are now troubled by the seeming intransigence of governments, industry and consumers to change policy and behaviour (IPCC, 2007). They see the reefs ahead, while the consumerist ship ploughs on, secure that it is unsinkable.

## Notes

1. Based on a presentation made at the Critical Management Studies 4 Conference, Service Work Stream, Cambridge, UK, 4–6 July 2005.

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