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Should Consumer Citizens Escape the Market?

By
ERIC J. ARNOULD

This article uses a sociological perspective to question the validity of critiques of consumer culture. First, the author examines the debate over whether consumers possess true freedom of action, reviewing problems critics find in the notion of “agency.” Second, the author proposes that anticonsumption ideology is class-based, anachronistic, and sometimes confuses consumption with materiality. Third, the author examines what it may mean to “escape” from consumerism, using an example from a marginalized African community deprived of the means of consumption. The notions of “the market” and “marketing” are reviewed as institutions and practices with ancient roots that assume varying forms in different cultural contexts rather than as sources of pathology. Finally, the author suggests that marketing and consumerism may be enlisted for the practice of citizenship and engagement in progressive political action.

Keywords: consumption; critical sociology; materiality; political action; Romantic utopia

Just as medieval society was balanced on God and the Devil, so ours is balanced on consumption and its denunciation.

—Baudrillard (1970/1998, 196)

Critiques from the right and left, from sociological to religious perspectives, inveigh against market capitalism and contemporary consumerism. As Baudrillard’s epigraph suggests, the denunciation of consumption is characteristic of our age, and the choir of voices has increased in amplitude as the scope of consumerism has expanded geographically and culturally without altering its ritually evoked positions. This article analyzes the meanings of the concepts of “consumers,” “citizens,” and “markets” in an effort to move beyond the highly ritualized arguments surrounding consumerism and capitalism. First, I review some positions on action in consumer research and suggest the term “agency” is conceptually problematic. Second, I discuss the term “consumers” and propose that the anticonsumption ideology is anachronistic,

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class-based, and confused with the question of materiality. Third, I examine the idea of “escape,” where we confront a Romantic idea, the apotheosis of which is the utopian dream. The dangers of escape are illustrated with an example from a marginalized African community deprived of the means of consumption. Next, I discuss the notions of “the market” and “marketing” and try to disassociate them from capitalism. Finally, I suggest some implications of the discussion for citizen consumers.

Should?

Many social theorists argue that progressive social action would be more likely if consumers would seek escape from the strictures of the current consumption paradigm (Ewen 1976/2001; Halton 2000; Klein 2000; D. Miller 1988; Ritzer 1993; Schor 1998, 2004). Implied in their arguments is the notion of agency—the physical or mental ability, skill or capability that enables actors to do something. The actor is assumed to proceed under his or her own volition, or at least without the permission of another.

Such views can be traced to Marx, who argued that producers, those who sold their labor to capitalists to make their living, should escape the market as a condition of reclaiming the full value of their labor. Producers were thus urged to return to a consumption regime that featured authentic use values over fetishized exchange values. A socialist revolution that returned the means of production to the control of the working class, according to Marx, was the precondition for this happy event (Marx 1887/1977).

However, there is a doubtful tone in some contemporary writing about the prospects for autonomous consumer action. Bourdieu's (1977, 1984) theory and subsequent consumer research (Allen 2002; Holt 1998) argue that consumers invest in, exchange, and deploy various kinds of capital resources. Furthermore, one kind or resource, cultural capital, is said to be basically class-distributed knowledge of various sign systems and consumption practices, inevitably subordinate to the logic of market capitalism. How people consume through historically determined, class-distributed, and embodied presuppositions defines and differentiates them as social categories and actors.

Baudrillard (1970/1998) argued that autonomous consumer action has become impossible. He wrote, “Differentiation may then take the form of the rejection of

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objects, the rejection of ‘consumption,’ and yet this still remains the very ultimate in consumption” (p. 90). Baudrillard rejected the possibility of successful social change in ideas like eco-consumerism, green consumption, religious asceticism, voluntary simplicity, downsizing, going off the grid, and other such differentiating practices that may well be rationalized by actors in terms of a folk understanding that such actions constitute choices to escape from the market. The reason for his pessimism, articulated at length in *The Consumer Society*, is that the consumer economy forecloses the possibility of escape, because all action is subordinate to the logic of the consumption of signs. In consumer culture, “the solution to social contradiction is not equalization but differentiation. No revolution is possible at the level of a code” (Baudrillard 1970/1998, 94). In other words, sign value has replaced use value. But Baudrillard’s vision is conservative, and it rejects consumers’ capability for progressive political action implied in the word “should.”

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Firat and Venkatesh (1995) offered a more optimistic appraisal of the situation confronting the postmodern consumer who, living in a fragmented society, enjoys more potential choice of maneuver than under the realm of modernism. They claimed that “much consumption does take place outside the market system” (p. 258), citing as examples flea markets and swap meets that are typically organized, although not exclusively, in terms of market logic (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Herrmann 1997).

De Certeau (1984) offered a possibility of *détournement* or reappropriation of market resources to ends not envisioned by marketers, and often through mundane or playful everyday practices (Aubert-Gamet 1997). In this view, consumers gradually but inevitably erode marketers’ control through microemancipatory practices that decenter market-determined subjectivity and accelerate fragmentation of the acting subject (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, 255).

Maffesoli (1996, 18) focused not on the individual, but on sociability, or when “the collective sensibility which arises from the aesthetic form results in an ethical connection between acting subjects.” This ethical connection, linked to the logic of the gift in the tradition of the French Anti-Utilitarian Social Movement (M.A.U.S.S.), creates heterotopia. In other words, “communal sensibility . . . offers an alternative to both the production and distribution of goods (economic or

symbolic)" (Maffesoli 1996, 17). Social movements that reappropriate marketer-produced resources and limit marketers' access to them (Cova and Cova 2002), or that assume marketing functions and graft them onto a communitarian ethos, might be read as evidence of escapes (Muniz and Schau 2005).

In this vein, agapic (selfless or altruistic) love and storgic (affectionate, friendship-based) love are often experienced and practiced (Belk and Coon 1993) in terms of the logic of the gift, offering escape from market logic even if, as Illouz (1997) has shown, romantic (agapic/storgic) love is in essence a consumption form. Similarly, D. Miller (1998) found elements of agapic love and also religious sacrifice that eludes market logic in mundane shopping and housekeeping. Similar, the anti-utilitarian logic of the gift persistently influences contemporary social relationships, informal market exchanges, and inheritance practices (Caillé 1994/2005; Cheal 1988; Curasi, Prince, and Arnould 2004; Herrmann 1997; Mauss 1925).

According to Ozanne and Murray (1995), real consumer emancipation requires the reflexively defiant consumer. Emancipation is possible if one develops a reflexive distance from the marketing code (i.e., becomes code conscious), acknowledging its structuring effects rather than living within the code unwary (Ozanne and Murray 1995, 522-23; D. Miller 2005, 9). Contra Baudrillard, consumers can fend off the marketer-imposed code if they are able to disentangle marketer's artifice from the value in use of marketer-supplied resources.

Postmodern consumers' ability to act for themselves comes through recognition that one is "a participant in an ongoing, never ending process of construction that includes a multiplicity of moments where things (most importantly as symbols) are consumed, produced, signified, represented, allocated, distributed and circulated" (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, 250; see also D. Miller 2005, 9). Notice that these authors stressed consumers' proactive, productive, or presumptive behaviors in contrast with the passive consumers of modernist social theory (Ewen 1976/2001; Halton 2000; Packard 1957). Cyberspace may offer yet more freedom of action if one believes that in cyberspace the consumer is freed from constraints which hamper freedom of action in the sociophysical world (Venkatesh 1998; "Living a Second Life" 2006).

Problems with Consumer Agency

The ideas referred to above may suggest that "consumers have free reign in the play of signs to piece together a collage of meanings that express the [individual's] desired symbolic statements" (Murray 2002, 428). This agency questions the institutional ordering mechanisms discussed in some consumption sociology (Packard 1957; Ewen 1976/2001; Ritzer 1993), but it evades the problem of structuring habitus in Bourdieu's theories and sign systems in Baudrillard's. Instead, researchers employ agency or some synonym to express an optimistic view of consumer freedom, for example, autonomy (Thompson and Haytko 1997, 16); free will (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003, 331); and ability to produce culture

(Peñaloza 2001, 393), to produce producer's products (Kozinets et al. 2004, 671), and to transform brands into symbolic markers of cultural categories (Fournier 1998, 367).

Unfortunately, the agency construct encounters some fundamental conceptual problems despite attempts to rescue it (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). First, the notion of agency attributes (mostly post hoc) some form of innate capacity, ability, or intention to actors and their action (Fuchs 2001; Loyal and Barnes 2001). In this way, the construct relies on an historical and particularly Western view of the autonomous self (Meyer and Jespersen 2000) that is an artifact of the Western market-driven economy, rooted in earlier developments in Western theology (Campbell 1987; Meyer and Jespersen 2000). Agency is really about the institutional authority to act, and thus agentic action is ultimately derived from actors' class-based institutional roles within consumer society rather than freedom from them. Agentic behaviors can hardly exist apart from cultural templates that authorize and guide action. As Bourdieu (1977, 1984) and others (e.g., Swidler 1986) have shown in some detail, culture always shapes peoples' habitus or strategies for action and understanding, and if they live in a consumer culture, those strategies cannot be prior to or elsewhere than this shaping process.

A second problem with the agency construct is the impossibility of separating empirically autonomous, or "free," from "determined" behaviors (Loyal and Barnes 2001). Unfortunately, social action can be explicated with reference to elements of choice or causation depending upon the scale of analysis. In other words, there is no difference in the characteristics of action that "could have been otherwise" and those that "could not have been otherwise" thus deciding in favor of freedom or determination.

In the end, the critique finds consumer agency is little more than a folk model. In other words, if people act agentially, they are agentic (Fuchs 2001). And it celebrates a Western version of actorhood and evokes value-laden notions of freedom, constraint, and transcendence of constraint via choice, constructed using cultural resources. We may doubt consumers' ability to emancipate themselves, to develop reflexive distance from the marketing code by acknowledging its structuring effects, or to fend off the marketer-imposed code because action is always institutionally authorized by market-mediated institutions.

Consumers

The next issue to consider is whether "consumers" should escape the market in the pursuit of citizenship. On this point, many sociological theorists seem doubtful of their prospects. Consumers are thought to exist in a permanent state of longing deluded by empty commercial promises that cannot satisfy these desires (Elliott 1997, 292). From Packard (1957) to Ewen (1976/2001), and on to Ritzer (1993) and Schor (1998, 2004), there is a sociological cottage industry devoted to the proposition that consumers as consumers cannot escape their

degraded condition as pawns in a marketing power game. In extreme forms, this position is determinist and its implications dystopian (Halton 2000), recalling nightmarish fictional depictions of modern society (Huxley 1932/1946).

While progressive in intent, this work makes some fundamental mistakes that miscast consumers. This work unintentionally distorts the lived experience of consumer culture because of the use of analytic methods that generally rely on aggregate data. First, this leads to a confusion of causes with effects; for example, massive expenditures on advertising and marketing must be constricting consumer imaginations, diverting consumers from what “really matters”—typically family, community, and/or nature—and creating a dominated consumer subject (Ewen 1976/2001; M. C. Miller 1988; Packard 1957; Schor 1998, 2004). And yet abundant case studies show some consumers building relationships and community and sometimes turning both media and marketer provided resources to their own, sometimes political, ends (Kozinets 2001, 2002; Kozinets and Handelman 2004). Yet purists decry the emergence of community whenever consumerist forms are detected, as is evident in the debate over megachurches (Colson 1992; Johnson 2005; “Learn on Sundays” 2006).

Second, this work sometimes infers causal paths between consumption and social and environmental pathologies from correlational data (e.g., Schor 1998, 2005). In a context of market fragmentation and consumer *détournement* and *bricolage* (Marion 2003; Peñaloza 2001; Thompson and Haytko 1997), absent detailed knowledge of consumer projects, it is incautious at best to infer general social tendencies from aggregate data, for example, hours spent watching television, annual expenditures in a government-defined product category, hours per day spent online, or even a divergence between growth in GDP and subjective quality of life.

A third problem with the portrayal of consumers in much of the critical sociology of consumption is implicit class bias. Baudrillard (1970/1998, 91) argued, “There is also a full-blown syndrome of anti-consumption, a very modern phenomenon . . . which is, at bottom, a metaconsumption and acts as a cultural indicator of class. . . . *It is on the basis of luxury that the lost simplicity is consumed* [italics added].” Baudrillard’s critique of the critique of consumption is basically that the critics speak from a middle-class subject position, and their arguments for voluntary simplicity (Elgin 1993) or even involuntary simplicity (Schor 2005) are steeped in the modernist critique of materialism by middle- and upper-class North Americans (Vanderbilt 1996), one often directed at the supposed consumer excesses of the masses (Scott 2005). And as Baudrillard presciently discerned, voluntary simplicity and other such alternatives indeed take the form of luxury consumption, whether of money or time.

From a different standpoint, one may wish to critique the anachronism and essentialism implicated in the social science construct “consumer.” Producer and consumer are essentialized binaries that derive from a model of industrial capitalism in which these two actors are divided by capital. But even if this model was once descriptive, there is reason to question its usefulness today. Persons who employ free-floating firm-provided resources to construct avatar-like online persona (Schau and Gilly 2003); who remake and remanufacture firm-provided

resources (Muniz and Schau 2005); who open workshops in the Second Life virtual community to sell claws, paws, and wings and then convert the Linden dollars earned there into U.S. dollars ("Living a Second Life" 2006; Venkatesh 1998); or who willingly transform themselves through technological, biological, or biotechnological prostheses (Schroeder 1994; Wood 1998) surely require us to rethink what consumer "does" and who consumer "is." In short, if consumers conform to the "dupe" model, meaningful political engagement seems problematic; if not, perhaps the opportunities are greater.

Some authors may have confused the problems of consumption with another problem, that of objectification. Critics often argue that marketing promotes too much social division and too much consumption, but from the perspective of materiality, the problem is elsewhere. First,

Proper materialism is one that recognizes the irreducible relation of culture, which through production . . . creates persons in and through their materiality. [True, c]apitalism splits culture and person apart into commodities separated from their intrinsic person-making capacities, and the illusion of pure humanism outside of materiality. (D. Miller 2005, 17)

In other words, both society at a macro-level and persons at an individual level are created in and through the material forms that are projected into the world; in our culture, through market-mediated consumption (D. Miller 1987). Then the logic of capitalism deludes us into thinking there is a human essence separate from material forms because so many such forms do confront us in an alienated commodity form (Marx 1887/1977). Nevertheless, everything from Klingon clothing to financial derivatives are created by humans but created according to emergent strategies of action embedded in marketing-mediated culture. In turn, their existence produces us as "Klingons" or merchant bankers (Kozinets 2001; Miyazaki 2005).

All societies proceed through the creation of external forms, and all societies are threatened by such forms developing autonomous momentum that threatens people with estrangement and in capitalism with alienation (D. Miller 1987, 180). This is as true of premarket peoples drawing images on a cave wall as it is of those of us who live in late capitalism threatened by the apparatus of marketing, advertising, franchising, market research, and the like that we ourselves animate.

Because capitalism splits persons from commodities through the apparatus of markets, when successful, consumers' postacquisition appropriative behaviors constitute a negation of the alienated commodity and its transformation into culturally meaningful objects (Kopytoff 1986; D. Miller 1987, 191-93). Thus, well-being is determined by the capacity for self creation by a society or individual through objects' appropriation (Miller 2005, 20). So we can view the proliferation of identity practices and lifestyle consumption communities not as marketer-provoked social manipulation but as consumption-fuelled reappropriation of differentiated selves (Thompson and Haytko 1997; Willis 1990).

Therefore, the proliferation of consumer goods is sometimes implicated in the creation of social worlds and identities that are generative of the sociality

Maffesoli (1996) imagined in a global capitalist context. Middle-class Indonesian men described by Keane (2005) do not have too many consumer goods, even though they have many outfits; they are not victims of consumer culture gone mad. Instead, a diverse repertoire of costume enables them to define themselves effectively relative to the differentiated, globalized social order they inhabit. Were they deprived of some of this array, their capacity to participate in contemporary Indonesian life would be constrained, as would their capacity for self-definition (Douglas 1992). These things are constitutive of sociality, not superficial symbols, Keane argues.

Escape

Next I turn to the question of escape in the interest of social and political engagement. No doubt the rich symbolic resources generated by market capitalism provide for all sorts of sign experimentation; “even as the market makes its profits, it supplies some of the materials for alternative or oppositional symbolic work” (Willis 1990). However, we have seen Baudrillard (1970/1998) argue that there is no escape at the level of the code. So perhaps it is worth reflecting on the idea of escape itself. And soon we realize that this idea of escape is largely a product of modernity and, as argued extensively elsewhere, a specifically Romantic response to it (Campbell 1987; Brown, Doherty, and Clarke 1998). Moves to reclaim personal “authenticity” (Arnould and Price 2000), the Dionysian ecstasies of anticonsumerist festivals (Kozinets 2002), the nostalgia of retrosapes (Brown and Sherry 2003), the socially engaged projection of utopia (Kozinets 2001; Macalaran and Brown 2005), or politically motivated ecotourism (Shultis and Way 2006) are forms of Romantic consumerism. Thus, the utopian spirit, however progressively motivated, is colonized by market logic.

Are there examples of escape from the market? A case can be made, but my example is dystopian. In 1999, I had occasion to revisit the sites of research conducted in the 1970s in Zinder, Niger Republic, on contending consumer globalizations (Arnould 1989). Zinder’s agriculturally based economy has long been integrated into global circuits of production and consumption, but by the turn of the millennium this was no longer true. Structural adjustment programs have done their work (Gervais 1995); Zinder’s economy is now marginalized from these circuits. Exports of value are reduced to things like sheep exported seasonally to Nigeria to celebrate the Muslim festival of Eid. Millet, sorghum, and cowpeas, for which there is no significant world market, are all that can be cultivated in this increasingly arid environment. Hence, Zinderois have virtually no economic resources; illiteracy and innumeracy ensure that they have virtually no skills to sell; they have no control of the political-economic agenda. One old friend frantically pled for the few cents needed to repair a bicycle tire, his only means of livelihood. This level of desperation and evident deprivation of the means of consumption is consummate. A former field assistant remarked, “One

bad harvest and they are all dead men.” This kind of escape is clearly not the kind envisioned by the critics of market capitalism, and yet it is hard to imagine a realistic alternative.

The Market

Market capitalism is attacked as the primary contemporary source of all kinds of social pathology. As mentioned, these attacks fix advertising (Ewen 1976/2001), brands (Klein 2000), commercial electronic media (Halton 2000), marketing research (Dávila 2001), and marketing formula (Rimke 2000; Ritzer 1993) squarely in their sights. Consumer conformity, loss of autonomy, falsity, materialism, kitsch, ecological collapse, routinization, global poverty, addiction, and obesity (Schor 2004) flow from the expanding reach of the market.

For an anthropologist, the demonization of markets and marketing is strange. The form of these attacks has changed little since Marx's economic, Thoreau's spiritual, and first-wave feminist social reformers' moral warnings in the nineteenth century. These echo today in the anti-McDonald's and voluntary simplicity movements (Keane 2006; Ritzer 1983; Scott 2005). The demonization of the market thus repeated is nicely summarized in Baudrillard's (1970/1998) epigraph and makes one wonder whether, despite its merits, the academic criticism of markets and consumption stems from critics' reactance to finding themselves objects of marketing or from a desired return to the comfortable master narratives of modernity (Bauman 1994).

[M]arkets and marketing are institutions and practices with ancient roots that assume varying forms in different cultural contexts.

But markets and marketing are institutions and practices with ancient roots that assume varying forms in different cultural contexts from the time of the Mesopotamian empires, in the trans-Saharan African caravan trade, or in pre-Conquest America (Brumfiel 1980; Meillassoux 1971; Polanyi, Arensberg, and Pearson 1957). Markets and marketing are not synonymous with capitalism; that is why we terminologically separate the industrial capitalism of Marx's day from the consumer-driven market capitalism of today. With Ilouz (1997, 1-2), we may recognize that late market capitalism democratizes the space of consumption, but

at the cost of social fragmentation, a growing gap between rich and poor, and exacerbation of the effects of economic externalities such as pollution and resource depletion. However, because markets are an institutional apparatus that can be put to many social ends, they also provide space for progressive political action. This separation is also why theorists (e.g., Baudrillard 1970/1998; Firat and Venkatesh 1995) can argue for the predominance of consumption over production in the current economic order.

For all of this, many groups are consumers to a far lesser extent than others, as in the Niger example (see also Chin 2001). Their interests are therefore unduly underrepresented in global consumptionscapes (Appadurai 1990), and this indeed results in a material culture constructed in the image of groups alien to the underrepresented. One may say that such groups are denied the means of consumption and hence the means to realize themselves through material cultural forms. When people are unable to perceive the means of self-creation, or because objective conditions prevent self-creation through consumption, it is here that alienation and social pathology emerge, not from the engagement with the market or consumption or objects themselves (Miller 1987, 189).

Some Implications for the Practice of Citizenship

I have suggested via my deconstructive conceit that, until scholars and activists recognize that we live in a historical moment in which market-mediated consumer culture is the dominant social fact, mode of action and interpretation, moral denunciations of consumption, and marketing are bound to repeat ritualized forms. Also, the proposed solutions may appear to “the masses” as displays of elite cultural capital. The point I want to make here is that successful, progressive practices of citizenship “should” take place through market-mediated forms in our culture because these are the templates for action and understanding available to most people. Let me first give an example from the more apolitical end of the spectrum of social movements, the microbrewery industry:

Microbreweries and brewpubs have attempted to define cognitively the specialty beer segment in ways that exclude major brewers and contract brewers. In our view, these oppositional identity strategies work in this context because the microbrewery movement actually resembles a true social movement in many respects. (Carroll and Swaminathan 2000, 731-32)

The loosely integrated producer-consumer microbrewery movement has significantly impacted the profitability and even mortality of contract brewers, premium brands produced by the major brewers, and the profitability and legitimacy of the major brewers (Carroll and Swaminathan 2000). The independent coffee house movement illustrates similar tendencies (Thompson and Arsel 2004). The point is that a form of social activism (infused with a marketplace logic of status marking and the play of specialized cultural capital [Holt 1998]) nonetheless

functions as a practice of self-conscious resistance with material repercussions for oligopolistic industries.

[S]uccessful, progressive practices of citizenship “should” take place through market-mediated forms in our culture because these are the templates for action and understanding available to most people.

Further toward the overtly political end of the political action spectrum, I might evoke the Fair Trade (FT) movement. FT is a sourcing strategy primarily for agricultural commodities produced in tropical or subtropical developing countries, such as coffee, chocolate, tea, bananas, and sugar among others. Sourcing is undertaken by an international confederation of nonprofit organizations, one of which is TransFair USA. FT organizations seek to reduce the layers of middlemen between producers in the developing world and consumers in the developed world by handling a number of marketing, logistics, and product certification functions. The goal is to move value shares up the market channel so that producers in developing countries receive a greater share of consumers' purchase price. FT is also a self-taxing scheme for concerned consumers who pay higher prices in return for the promise that producers will benefit directly from increased prices. Extensive survey research conducted in Guatemala, Peru, and Nicaragua indicates that across numerous standard social indicators, participants in TransFair USA marketing schemes reap positive benefits from this growing social movement. May we applaud that at a rate of 67 percent a year as compared to 12 percent growth for organic coffee, FT coffee is the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. coffee market, and that it has a 60 percent retail-location growth from 2003 to 2004 to thirty-five thousand locations in the United States (Arnould, Plastina, and Ball forthcoming)?

Finally, consider social movements at the most political end of the spectrum. In a book that received a lot of media attention, Hamburger and Wallsten (2006) argued for the permanence of Republican government based on nothing more than garden variety, data-based, mass-customized, target marketing of the type that reaches very small niche markets with precisely tailored messages and that make commercial—in this case Republican—messages seem attractive. And it works because marketized modes of action and address are part of American culture. In other words, marketing engenders shared forms of habitus and effective strategies for action and interpretation available to anyone.

But of course, all marketing campaigns are vulnerable to competition. Thus, one reads laudatory accounts on the left of marketing campaigns competitive with those of the Republican right, such as the “retail politics” of Sherrod Brown, who successfully ran for U.S. Senate in 2006. Brown engaged in mass-customizing the Democratic message and target marketing to disaffected white ex-manufacturing workers and Ohio-based CEOs alike. As John Nichols (2006, 11) wrote, “He recognizes that he will not crack the political codes of blue-collar counties that voted for Bush by repeating the talking points produced by a Democratic strategist in Washington.”

More broadly, active participation in contemporary commercial media plays a complex social and potentially liberatory political role and is thus at odds with the sociology of marketing and consumption supportive of the dupe theory (Jong and Stammers 2005; Pickard 2006; Strangelove 2005). Sherrod Brown won; the Democrats also won the 2006 election, challenging the Republican oligopoly much as the microbrewery industry challenged the brewing oligopoly. Retail politics in a consumer-friendly form can challenge political hegemonies.

*[T]o engage in progressive political action,
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While the above argument may seem fanciful, it is not far from Slater and Tonkiss’s (2001) recognition of the complex cycling and recycling of cultural forms through the market, a characteristic of advanced market-mediated consumer culture. Furthermore, these critical sociologists also recognize the importance of discriminating markets as an ideological idealization of neoliberals (p. 201) and as social and political forms whose effects and purposes are susceptible to influence through discourses and practices in which state, corporation, national, and global regulatory bodies as well as citizen activists all play a governance role, if often unequal ones (p. 145). In other words, marketing is an apparatus that may be enlisted in a variety of political projects.

Conclusion

This article sought to question some of the more ritualized approaches to the relationship between consumer culture and progressive social action. First, I

reviewed some positions on the consumers' freedom of action, and I suggested that imputations of agency are conceptually problematic. Second, I discussed the term "consumers" and proposed that the anticonsumption ideology that seems to underlie the title's overarching question is an anachronistic and essentializing class-based ideology. I then considered more fundamental questions of materiality and objectification that tend to get unhelpfully bundled with markets and marketing in some critical sociology. Third, I examined the idea of escape. Here I reminded readers that escape is a Romantic idea, a response to the modern machine age, the apotheosis of which is the utopian dream. The dangers of real escape were illustrated with an example from a part of the globe set adrift by globalization (Appadurai 1990). Next, I invited readers to unbundle the concept of marketing from the critique of capitalism. Finally, I circled back to the question of political action and suggested that progressive politicized action is entirely possible within the framework of a mass-market mediated consumer culture. In other words, to engage in progressive political action, consumer citizens need to escape neither consumption nor the market.

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