

BEYOND CONSUMER CAPITALISM

Media and the Limits
to Imagination

Justin Lewis



Beyond Consumer Capitalism

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to Imagination*

JUSTIN LEWIS

polity

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1

Introduction: The problems of consumer capitalism in the twenty-first century – and why we find it so difficult to appreciate them

People in the developed world are wealthier than at any time in human history. We have access to a vast array of consumer goods clamouring to improve the quality of our lives. A bounty of information and entertainment is available at the flick of a finger tip. Opportunities for communication abound: we can phone and email, text and tweet, post and blog, flickr and facebook, skype and type, all with a global reach and instantaneous response.

Despite this superabundance – and even before the ‘credit crunch’ arrived to expose the uncertainty of debt-dependent economies – there was little sense that we were living in a golden age. For all their material advantages, children born into the twenty-first century are rarely seen as a lucky generation. The future is rich, instead, with a sense of foreboding.

Doubts hover like storm clouds on the horizon: dwindling economic security, mounting debt, environmental degradation and a creeping sense that a system based on permanent economic growth is unsustainable. There is also a widespread feeling that the way we live now is not quite as good as it could be. The idea that ‘things can only get better’ has been replaced by the lament ‘is that all there is?’¹

What once drove us forward has become a treadmill, requiring

all our effort and energy to simply stay where we are. This sense of stasis is more than simply a reflection of the human condition or, for that matter, our capacity for discontent. The first part of this book begins with the proposition that we have reached a pivotal moment in our social development. Consumer capitalism, for all its abundance and its apparent dynamism, can no longer be relied upon to deliver human progress.

The limits of consumer capitalism

Ever since its emergence as a dominant industrial force, consumer capitalism has had its critics. Despite many attempts to forecast the system's demise,² capitalism has proved to be extraordinarily adaptable.³ Its persistence – alongside the collapse of alternatives – gives the system an air of permanence. Economies may wax and wane, but there is little sign that government-backed consumer capitalism is on the verge of collapse.

What we face in the twenty-first century is less a question of consumer capitalism's viability than its purpose. In an age of abundance, is the system still capable of fostering human development? The question is timely because we can observe a new set of conditions that suggest the system's ability to improve our lot is diminishing. These problems are sometimes difficult to appreciate because they are a product of the system's success.

Consumer capitalism's capacity for proliferation – to turn nature into dazzling aisles of consumable goods – is both its genius and, perhaps, its undoing. Its inexorable rise depends upon its ability to stimulate the production and consumption of objects without paying heed to matters of degree. Our supermarkets, big box stores and Amazonian web-aisles are testimony to the magnitude of the system's productivity. But the benefits of proliferation are finite.

In the 1970s – a decade associated with rising working-class prosperity in developed countries – Jeremy Seabrook documented the attitudes of older working-class people in Britain. He found, even then, both a dependence upon and an underlying

disillusionment with consumerism.⁴ The optimism of the post-war years had given way to a feeling of limited horizons. As one man told him: ‘The only chance of satisfaction we can imagine is getting more of what we’ve got now’,⁵ a sentiment that captures the absence of imagination at the heart of consumer capitalism. It is a system that can never envisage a moment when we have enough things.

The rise and fall of orthodoxies litter human history, and yet our collective imagination pins us firmly to the present. We behave and plan only for more of the same. There is no space, in this model, for a post-capitalist society,⁶ a place where the superfluity of consumer goods allows us to direct our energies away from the consumption of commodities towards other – potentially more purposeful – activities.

The material limits of a consumer capitalist vision force it into an encounter with the limits of the physical world. The idea of infinite economic growth was always going to fit awkwardly with the finite nature of life on earth. The first part of this book deals with the economic, social and environmental implications of this tension.

The economics of excess in a finite world

The economic recession towards the end of the twenty-first century’s first decade was an example of consumer capitalism’s tendency to over-reach in an attempt to create prosperity. The constant need for growth pushed us towards a reliance on mounting levels of debt in order to stimulate further the cycle of production and consumption.⁷ The system survived because of the largesse of governments who chose to use large amounts of public money to bail it out. This, of course, increased public debt and – ironically enough – increased our dependence on consumer capitalism to fill the gaps left by a more austere public sector.

The ‘credit crunch’ might have been avoided by a more sceptical attitude towards unfettered financial markets and more prudent government regulation. It is, however, symptomatic of

the problems faced by a system that requires constant increases in demand to sustain economic growth. Superfluity becomes a necessity rather than an achievement, a contradiction that becomes ever more burdensome for the increasingly bemused consumer.

In the twentieth century governments were forced to grapple with capitalism's tendency to drift towards monopoly.⁸ As companies grew, buying up competitors in waves of horizontal and vertical integration, they were able to make economies of scale and control distribution and publicity channels, driving out smaller competitors. They could then define the realm of choice to their own advantage, using their market power to drive out competition. While this remains a major problem (if we are concerned about the quality as well as the quantity of choice) – most of the world's music, for example, is produced by one of three global companies⁹ – it can be dealt with by anti-monopoly legislation.¹⁰ The state has thereby intervened (albeit rather feebly in recent years) to protect consumer choice – without which the system loses its dynamism and purpose.

But the economics of excess have created another paradox, one that pushes the idea of a 'rational consumer' to breaking point. While some might balk at Ben Fine's description of 'rational economic man' as combining 'the basest instincts of a selfish beast with the highest form of commercial calculation',¹¹ its twenty-first century articulation presents us with a problem. This combination of self-interest (or, in more altruistic societies, ethical concerns) and careful calculation pushes us to buy the best (or most ethically produced) product at the best or fairest price. Rational consumers provide consumer capitalism with its central logic.¹² En masse, or in well-heeled niches, they create a kind of market meritocracy, a place where quality will thrive.

In the developed world rational consumers now find themselves faced with two irreconcilable pressures. The sheer scale of goods available makes choosing what to buy both time-consuming and difficult. There are far more commodities available than there were fifty years ago, but no more leisure time in which to make decisions. We can either devote all our free time to making well-informed purchases, or conclude that this is a poor use of

a precious resource (our free time) and give up trying – hoping, instead, that we might be steered by various unreliable prompts.¹³ Choice – once a way to assert our independence – becomes an encroachment on the time we have available to act independently.

The unlimited increase in consumer goods (on which the system depends) thus comes crashing up against the finite nature of our time on earth. The rational consumer begins – metaphorically at least – to fall apart. At the same time the value of commodities in an age of superabundance becomes increasingly difficult to maintain, as the empirical impact of each new object on our quality of life lessens with every purchase.

Consumer capitalism and the meaning of life

The social constraints consumer capitalism now faces are no less profound. The system's appeal has always rested on a straightforward deal: capitalism creates wealth, and wealth makes us happier, healthier, more secure and fulfilled. Since the ability of a society to provide healthcare, education and enhance people's quality of life depends upon resources, consumer capitalism's productive flair has been embraced by a broad cross section of political opinion. It could fuel personal wealth *and* public services.

For classical economics, this deal is set in perpetuity. Increasing consumption and the desire for a better quality of life are locked in a permanent embrace. Yet this is also beginning to unravel. A growing body of research suggests that the relationship between a country's gross domestic product and the quality of life of its citizens has a clear and visible end-point. Once a society reaches a certain level of affluence, the evidence suggests, economic growth ceases to have an impact on our physical or mental health.

In the twenty-first century, most developed countries have already passed this point. The push for economic growth is seen as necessary to sustain employment levels, but growth, in itself, no longer delivers clear social benefits. The consumer society's persistent claims to make us happier, healthier and more fulfilled

reverberates around the echo-chamber of advertising with an increasingly hollow ring.

Once the relationship between consumer capitalism and quality of life begins to drift apart, the system loses its most compelling rationale. Indeed, for the growing field of quality of life research, consumerism is seen as an increasingly malign influence, a compulsion that pushes us away from those non-material activities that are important sources of pleasure and meaning.

This is not to say that we do not find pleasure and value in objects, or to deny the advantages brought by the growth in affluence of consumer societies.¹⁴ The provision of comfort surrounded by a diversity of goods has all kinds of material and symbolic benefits.¹⁵ But these benefits are finite: our capacity to enjoy consumer goods is limited by time and space. We have now reached a stage where the continual proliferation of consumer goods risks cluttering up rather than adding to the meaning of life.

Consumer capitalism as a threat to our quality of life

The third strike against consumer capitalism today is perhaps the best known. The environmental limitations of our twenty-first-century world – the finite nature of the earth's resources and its delicate ecology – are easy to grasp and well documented. In some ways, these limitations are less immediate than economic and social constraints. The system's genius for transformation makes it possible to imagine doing more with less – recycling and reusing materials with increasing efficiency, for example – to enable economic growth for centuries to come.

The more immediate environmental problems created by consumer capitalism lie in that domain that economists refer to as 'externalities'. The business of transforming raw materials into commodities, of distributing, selling and ditching them, has a myriad of environmental consequences. As the scale of our productive capacity grows, our ability to damage and destroy eco-systems grows with it. While we may be prompted to deal with the more conspicuous and manageable of these 'externalities'

(reducing various forms of urban pollution in the developed world, for example) we tend to neglect those with less immediate effects upon affluent societies.

The most alarming of these is the way in which our fossil fuel driven economy is altering the earth's ecology, creating a layer of greenhouse gases that will warm the planet with consequences for life on earth. The Stern Review on the economic consequences of climate change referred to 'the greatest market failure the world has ever seen'.¹⁶ It is possible to imagine consumer capitalism running on clean energy, but the time-lag between cause and effect provides little incentive for either business or democratic governments to do what is required.

When the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published their first comprehensive report in 1990, they described the devastating consequences if we failed to curtail global warming. But these dangers were not immediate: the accumulating impact of greenhouse gases lingers long after their production. The time span of the 1990 report – looking fifty to a hundred years ahead – gave licence for governments to prevaricate.

This, in part, explains our singular failure to address the problem. Since 1990, far from changing course, we have allowed greenhouse emissions to rise significantly, with mounting evidence of risks which draw ever closer. Even when economists described the purely fiscal costs of climate change,¹⁷ the response from business and government was, at best, half-hearted. We are now approaching (or, indeed, may have passed) the point at which we will be able prevent significant climate change or prepare for the subsequent disruption.

In this unhappy scenario, consumer capitalism's drive towards further economic growth pushes the decades of reckoning ever nearer. As a system, it is unresponsive to longer term threats, which might lead it to switch to more expensive but cleaner forms of energy. It is also uniquely intolerant of one of the solutions, which would involve less dependence on the proliferation of consumer goods and economic growth. This is a scorched earth policy in more than a metaphorical sense. Consumer capitalism, in its current form, represents a threat to the collective security and well-being of the developed world.

Why is it so difficult to imagine other forms of progress?

Despite its economic, social and environmental shortcomings, consumer capitalism continues to dominate our field of vision. I write at a time when those on the political right urge public austerity and faith in the market's ability to bounce back, while the left calls for more public spending to stimulate growth in the consumer economy. They share the desire for business as usual, differing only on how best to achieve it.

Neither proposal addresses the model's economic limits, its failure to improve the quality of life or its push towards alarming environmental outcomes. In the developed world, consumer capitalism offers solutions to problems – lack of money for a good life, lack of consumer choice¹⁸ – that are, in affluent societies, increasingly irrelevant.¹⁹ And both sides have, thus far, failed to grasp the profundity of the system's limits.

There is, of course, dissent. Consumer activism²⁰ now exists side by side with anti-consumerism. Kim Humphery has observed that much of this anti-consumerism is tilted at individuals rather than societies, and is based on moral disapproval rather than more systemic issues,²¹ while Jo Littler has shown how 'radical consumerism' and the traditional variety can be two sides of the same coin.²² There is, nonetheless, an increasing sense of disillusionment with the consumerist project. The Occupy Movement, for example, has expressed both frustration and dissatisfaction with business as usual.²³ It has been criticized for its incoherence and inability to articulate clear alternatives, but this is less a fault of the protesters than the orthodoxy they seek to question. Consumer capitalism appears to have created a cultural system that makes it difficult to conceive other models of human progress. Its economic, social and environmental limitations are sustained by a lack of imagination. The rest of this book looks at some of the reasons why this is so.

Media and the limits of imagination

The Disney corporation, one of the world's largest media companies, has promoted the idea of the 'imagineer' – people who engineer imaginative landscapes.²⁴ We have created a culture in which our society's principal imagineers – the greatest concentration of creative talent and energy – work in the advertising industry. Part II looks at the ways this industry permeates almost every aspect of our cultural lives and considers the consequences of this relentless intrusion.

The sheer volume of creative time, effort and resources that we devote to advertising has allowed it, as a cultural form, to stretch its own boundaries. Advertising has become much more than just a sales pitch; it can be funny, moving, ingenious and engaging. But for all its wit and skill, it operates under the constraints of the consumerist system that depends upon it. Every story told by advertising rests upon an increasingly untenable proposition: that our quality of life is bound up in the purchase of commodities.

Advertisements may, individually, touch upon many aspects of human experience. Collectively, they repeat the idea that the *only* source of pleasure, popularity, status, security and meaning is in what Sut Jhally calls 'the dead world of things'.²⁵ They insist that the social world – the source of so much of what we value – is simply an extension of the world of commodities. Even if we ignore or reject most of the advertisements we see or hear (indeed, the ubiquity of advertising means that we must), it is difficult to remain untouched by this volume of repetition.

Advertising, in this sense, pretends to be outside politics, but it is deeply embedded in a series of highly contested ideas. If Part I explores the extent to which consumerism is a partisan, limited and increasingly problematic world view, Part II shows how advertising both sustains and expresses this view – not as some coordinated or conscious effort, but simply in the way it goes about its business.

Part III considers a cultural form that, in some ways, begins from a very different philosophical premise. Journalism is strongly tied to a democratic tradition, to the idea that for democracy to flourish

people must be well informed. If advertising circulates conventional wisdom, journalism prides itself on questioning it.

Journalism is thereby well positioned to interrogate consumer capitalism's shortcomings, to report alternative views and make what was once accepted controversial. But it remains constrained by its embrace with commerce. The tawdrier aspects of this embrace – the many ways in which commercialism leads us to redefine public interest as private intrigue rather than civic concern – are well documented. Part III explores a more fundamental constraint: the way in which our understanding of news has been shaped by a business model of news and information.

When journalism became a business, news became a commodity – one that came to be defined by its most profitable form. The democratic value of news is based on the longevity and value of the information it provides. The commercial value of news, by contrast, is based on its impermanence. A newspaper's profitability depends on the idea that news is a flimsy, fragile form of information with a short shelf life, that being informed depends not on the quality of information but on its quantity and regularity.

The rise of a commercial news industry meant that news became defined in part by the notion of built-in obsolescence. The newspaper became the apotheosis of a disposable commodity. Yesterday's news was, by definition, of little value, and news became increasingly bound up with the idea that what mattered above all was the immediate, the current, the here and now. The commercial stress on immediacy pushes journalism away from asking larger, more profound social and economic questions.

This manifests itself in the coverage given to economics and, more specifically, economic growth. The economic, social and environmental problems of our current growth model outlined in Part I are, in theory, grist to the journalistic mill. They pose serious challenges to the purveyors of conventional wisdom. News is precisely the kind of civic space in which these challenges might be aired – instead, we find little questioning of the idea that economic growth is always both desirable and necessary. It is not simply treated as uncontroversial, but as an objective good.

It is hardly surprising, in this context, that most news outlets failed to anticipate the banking crisis. The commodity form

of news made investigation of structural economic problems difficult. What needs to be reclaimed and rethought is the democratic purpose of news, a space where our imaginations might flourish, and where we might be able to begin a more profound examination of the limits of consumer capitalism.

Part IV begins by stepping back to look at the communications and creative industries as a whole. While this is an important economic sector in its own right – more than 7% of global GDP – these are industries whose significance surpasses their economic value. They produce commodities that dominate our leisure time and, indeed, our consciousness.

The information and creative industries are dominated by large global conglomerates.²⁶ Concerns about protecting cultural diversity and the quality of content in its less profitable forms have been played out in the politics of trade agreements (battles over the right to subsidize local production so that it can survive the onslaught of Hollywood, for example) and monopoly legislation. What has received less attention is the way in which increasing dependence on a particular business model shapes our conception of technological progress.

The media and telecommunications industries have always been adept at planned obsolescence: the shift from vinyl to CD, for example, was pushed by integrated conglomerates in order to create new markets for old content and sell new hardware.²⁷ But the digital age has meant that cultural forms – like music, films, computer software and games – are no longer so obviously bound to physical objects that can be bought and sold.²⁸ This has pushed the industry towards business models increasingly dependent on upgrading the digital devices that allow us to play with, watch, listen to or use cultural forms.

The industry's pursuit of this new business model has been a spectacular success. And there have, along the way, been genuine innovations in technology and design. It has also been an environmental disaster, shortening the shelf-life of electronic devices – most of which are discarded in full working order – to create mountains of toxic electronic waste amid a frenzy of production, consumption and replacement.

It has also created a culture in which we associate progress with

consumption. Progress is bound up less with creating innovative, diverse and well-crafted cultural forms than with the speed at which we dump and replace digital devices. The industry thus not only embraces consumer capitalism, it epitomizes it. Its business model has become a philosophy, a way of life. As long as we are swept along in this constant cycle of replacement it is difficult to imagine other forms of progress, to see how innovation might serve a social and cultural purpose as well as a commercial imperative.

Part IV ends by trying to envisage other ways of moving forward. The final chapter sketches out proposals for opening up the space in which we can conceive new ways of organizing the future. Consumer capitalism may well play a role in that future, but not at the expense of more promising and more sophisticated visions of human development.

Part I

*Stretching beyond its limits: The tired
machinery of consumer capitalism*

2

Consumer capitalism as a cul-de-sac

Consumer capitalism dominates our economic, social and cultural life. Its omnipresence in the developed world has, in part, depended upon the actions of governments to moderate its excesses and harness its profits for public good. In the twenty-first century this understanding appears to have withered, and consumer capitalism frames many of our assumptions.

The notion of a consumer culture now pervades most aspects of private and public life. There is, however, an increasing tension between a consumer culture based on permanent growth in production and the finite nature of our physical, social and psychological landscape.

Consumer capitalism as a way of life

An economic system may simply be a way of organizing the production and distribution of resources, but there is nothing innocent or incidental about these arrangements. Any system of production and consumption imposes its own range of possibilities. Economics can inspire wars and revolutions, it is at the heart of most political