

Consumed: How markets corrupt children, infantilize adults and swallow citizens whole

Benjamin R. Barber

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Reviewed by Michael Calderbank

Shopping is taking over our lives. If, from the vantage point of 2007 this does not strike us an entirely surprising claim, it is nevertheless worth pausing to consider the irony that – scarcely two decades since the collapse of the Communist bloc – it is the very ‘freedoms’ which were claimed to demonstrate the unsurpassable virtue of the capitalist free market that now stand accused of corrupting, perhaps fatally, the very notion of a democratic public realm.

At one level we have never had more choice, beset as we are with relentlessly expanding options on which cash may be splashed. And yet these millions of individual micro-choices do not aggregate into collective liberty or autonomy, far from it. The freedom of the consumer comes at the expense of the erosion of civic space, since individuals are no longer concerned with strengthening the bonds which sustain a society governed by democratically agreed norms. As privatised citizen-consumers we are witnessing a steady disintegration of our ability to determine collectively those goods from which we all benefit.

And yet if any progressive politics worthy of the name must therefore contest the desirability of neo-liberalism’s rampant consumerism, there is also a huge challenge to be faced. We can have no ready recourse to a supposedly ‘authentic’, reach-me-down model of democratic-mindedness, as though a good dose of right-thinking would suffice to dispel today’s infatuated worship in today’s temples to consumerism. For just as the ill-tempered polemics of a Richard Dawkins or a Christopher Hitchens fail to properly engage with, let alone shift, the faith of the religious believer, so simply indicting the ‘false consciousness’ of today’s shopper is equally ineffectual. To appreciate the depth of affective commitment that grips the individual consumer today, we must appreciate the mechanisms through which our desires take shape.

The latest in a series of salvos at our contemporary predicament, Benjamin R. Barber’s critique of consumerism lies in his recognition of its power to play upon the desires and anxieties which attend the constructions of our identity. Today’s subjects are bombarded from birth with millions of commodified images of wish-fulfilment, and it is in this context that we learn to locate and recognise ourselves. The reproduction of consumer society depends upon its continual ability to make us permanently dissatisfied with what we are and what we possess in order to create an insatiable craving for the next ‘must have’ commodity.

The essential narrative here strongly recalls Christopher Lasch’s 1970s broadside on American society *The Culture of Narcissism*, which itself fed upon Sigmund Freud’s work on regression and Adorno and Horkheimer’s 1940s critique of the totalising reach of the

'Culture Industry' with its ubiquitous logic of commoditification. Barber's core claim is that the 'protestant work ethic' that Max Weber discerned as the animus of early capitalism has given way to a pervasive 'ethos of infantilisation' which has replaced an ascetic acceptance of deferred gratification with a new sense of immature selfishness where work is undertaken only to facilitate other occasions for satisfaction without delay. The consumer longs to recreate the fantasy of early childhood omnipotence, and the attendant belief that the whole world exists to answer the every whim of 'His majesty the baby'. This is a retreat into self-absorption, the withdrawal of connection and concern for others as the individual subject becomes captivated by the apparent promise of immediate satisfaction.

If it is not an especially original argument, it is nevertheless thoughtfully argued and amply illustrated. No longer are we inclined to put income aside 'for a rainy day', to 'make do and mend', or to accept personal sacrifices if they help others to prosper. Like spoilt children or hormonal adolescents we want it and we want it now. This, Barber argues, is having deleterious effects on our general development. The reading public doesn't have the patience or imagination to read a richly textured, slowly unfolding, emotionally complex narrative anymore; many would be content to flick through a *Harry Potter*. Glastonbury is over-run with the middle-aged banker-types wanting to buy their teenage kicks. Like Jennifer Saunders' character in *Absolutely Fabulous*, parenting responsibilities can seem like a resented burden on the individual's right to a lifetime's self-indulgence. There's even a market to celebrate your retirement with a spot of bungy-jumping or sky-diving. But be warned: live long enough to be a burden and you can't expect any care or dignity in your final years. It is a compelling picture.

In parallel to this account of psychological regression in adults is the depiction a converse process by which children are pitched prematurely into the role of fully-fledged consumers. So corporate marketing executives spend millions on bombarding the minds of pre-teen children with highly seductive-commodity images, creating desire for commodities and brands even before social bonds with other people have developed, and establishing patterns of expenditure and reward which will guide a lifetime's consumption. Nor is the effect purely psychological – if the development of our own body-images are mediated by cultural representations, then it is easy to see how the circulation of millions of images of impossibly beautiful celebrities and size zero models clearly reinforces negative self-evaluations, culminating in eating disorders and an upsurge in cosmetic surgery. When corporations are manufacturing push-up bras and thongs marketed at seven-year-olds, it is pretty clear that young girls are becoming obliged to 'buy into' the almost ubiquitous images of radically commodified female bodies, or else feel that they are undesirable and worthless. In short in pursuit of the ideal self-image we are turning ourselves into 'ideal' commodities, the ultimately desirable objects.

Whilst much of Barber's bleak characterisation of consumerism seems to ring true, his account, like that of Lasch before him, occasionally risks lapsing into a romantic nostalgia for pre-consumerist times and a correspondingly backward-looking moralism. If the attraction of consumerism feeds on a rolling back of a culture conducive to psychological maturity, the implication seems to be that it is displacing superior values apparently inherent in earlier modes of class society. Such an interpretation would be extremely prob-

lematic. Would the opposite of ‘infantilisation’ imply a return to asceticism, repressed sexuality and patriarchal discipline?

To be sure, Barber is keenly aware that consumerism and the fundamentalist religious reaction against it (be that Islamic or Judeo-Christian) are mutually implicated. But it is unclear that, if the *sine qua non* of secular democratic citizenship is held to be the wholesale repudiation of our most long-standing psychic urges (the fantasies, desires and anxieties which animate our earliest experiences), we will be able to avoid reproducing a grey and joyless civic realm capable of inspiring little affective commitment in its denizens. Religious fanaticism and addictive consumerism are united in their capacity to animate fantasies of wish-fulfilment and inspire the passions.

Any alternative, progressive vision of the good society will fail to gain sufficient traction unless it rivals the intensity of aesthetic and emotional commitment offered by rival world-views. If the critique of consumerism is to be grounded in a normative appeal to a fulfilling maturity, then perhaps Barber needs to enrich his notion of adult citizenship along the lines of the Aristotelian concept of *eudaimonia*. This refers neither to the condition of a short-sighted obsession immediate gratification said to characterise consumerism, nor to an ascetic cult of renunciation, but to a richly satisfying condition under which the full measure of our collective abilities is allowed to flourish collectively.

All of which might sound like exactly the kind of teleologically-driven essentialist narrative which runs entirely against the grain of 1990’s postmodern cultural theory. But if it was once fashionable to celebrate with wide-eyed enthusiasm the individual’s ability to re-signify and re-appropriate dominant ideological meanings in the act of consumption, then such an attitude no longer seems to fit with the sense of collective social and political disempowerment which has become entrenched over the past decade even as our purchasing capacity has grown. Barber does not completely dismiss the idea of effective consumer activism, including boycotts, positively discriminating in favour of ethically-sourced goods, and ‘culture-jamming’ (the Situationist-inspired *détournement* of corporate advertising messages). But he shows that it is entirely possible to acknowledge that consumers might develop novel methods of resistance in our insurgency against the tyranny of the global market place, without concluding that such resistance will ever be sufficient to cancel effects of increasing social fragmentation and atomisation.

The relentless neo-liberal drive to commodify and privatise even the most elemental conditions necessary for our collective survival is eroding both foundations of effective solidarity and our capacity to democratically determine and articulate our collective interests. Much to his credit, Barber’s unflinching account does not conclude with recourse to simplistic solutions or glib reassurances. But nor does he merely offer a counsel of despair. Rather, Barber’s study should be read as a provocation, a demand that political progressives appreciate the scale of the challenge we face in developing a viable and compelling alternative to the neo-liberal agenda.

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