

Mass Consumption and Meaningful Democratic Politics

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LUKE CORDEN, OCT 18 2012

Mass consumption has steadily grown in influence whilst evolving into an integral feature of modern day economic, civil and political society. In the synchronistic rise of mass consumption and mass marketing we see dramatic changes in the way a society operates and views itself. One such change is the way citizens and government have become embedded with a consumer ideology that has repercussions for the democratic process. The following essay follows the rise of mass consumption in American society from the Fordist era of mass production through to the present era of mass consumerism. In placing the rise of consumerism in its historical context this essay seeks to ascertain whether or not mass consumption has gradually eroded meaningful democratic politics.

Firstly, this essay focuses on building a definition of mass consumption as distinct from mass production. How it arose and what the immediate consequences were for American society. Secondly, this essay explores how mass consumption and mass marketing have led to the segmentation of American society. Conscious of the rise of mass consumption and mass marketing the third and final part of this essay argues that the ideology of consumerism has become so deeply embedded within the individual that it has undermined societies ability to mount any meaningful political project.

It would be prudent here, to establish what is meant by 'meaningful democratic politics'. This essay does not make a distinction between meaningful or meaningless aspects of democratic politics but instead looks at whether mass consumption has rendered democratic politics meaningless as an entirety. As this essay is focused on mass consumption in America it is appropriate that we define democracy in the Liberal sense. A democracy in this sense should be a government elected by the people in free elections. It should also be a form of government that is free from class distinction or privilege (Allen, 2006).

The concept of mass production is synonymous with the automobile and the rise of the automobile is forever linked with the Ford Motor Company and General Motors. These two companies laid the road towards the American dream. Initially, it was the Ford who pioneered a qualitatively different mode of production in its pursuit of building and supplying the 'universal car.'

The Ford Motor Company combined and adapted the precision methods, specialised machine tools and sequential operations of armory practice.[1] These various elements were further combined with the introduction of the moving assembly line in 1913-14 and applied to the machining of interchangeable automobile parts, which greatly increased productivity and made the finished product accessible to the masses. The success of Ford's method spread rapidly throughout American industry increasing productivity by an order of magnitude (Rupert, 1995:63-64).

Mode of production and level of productivity were not the only things to undergo dramatic change during the Fordist era; human agency began its evolutionary journey on the road to consumerism. In introducing the \$5-a-day wage Ford, following the Keynesian tradition, ensured workers had the means to become consumers of their own productivity. Consumption became a cultural prerogative, mass consumption the prerogative of mass culture. (Gartman, 1994:6).

The societal shift created by Fordism should not be underestimated and yet it was Ford's main competitor, General Motors and the business strategy of Alfred Sloan that further advanced this shift. Rather than specialising in

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conformity and productivity 'Sloanism' focused on "a changing array of models and prices"[2] each suited to a particular consumer model (Aldridge, 2003:40).

Companies and corporations specialising in advertising, branding and product development grew up around the industry standards set by General Motors and Ford. These corporations offered a way to take part in, and even 'achieve' the American dream. They became powerful actors responsible for shaping the emergent Americanism. The automobile played the leading role in industry; more than a mere product to be acquired, it was literally and metaphorically a vehicle of progress capable of steering the individual (and society in general) on a social, economic and personal trajectory towards the American dream.

In these early stages mass consumption can be seen to be playing a dual role. Firstly, it allows for the boom in mass productivity by keeping big business profitable. Secondly, it can be understood as an activity in keeping with the liberal ideal of progress underpinning the American dream. As Aldridge (2003:26) asserts, "for first world societies, consumption is part of their vision of the good society, the good life, and the way to achieve them."

Generally speaking the political sector left big business alone during the boom period in the 1920s. There were however a few voices of discontent. One such voice belonged to the influential political theorist Walter Lippmann. Lippmann believed the success of the manipulative techniques in the advertising industry suggested that the majority of citizens could not be trusted to be rational actors. Lippmann labelled these irrational masses 'the bewildered herd' and held them up as proof that guiding principles of democracy were being undermined and that democratic theory ought therefore to be re-thought (Aptheker, 1995).

In general though mass marketing was seen as a means to create mass consumption and therefore necessary in creating a stable, happy society as can be seen by President Hoover's 1928 address to the marketing fraternity:

"You have taken over the job of creating desire and have transformed people into constantly moving happiness machines, machines which have become the key to economic progress (BBC, 2002)."

Not until the aftermath of the Wall Street Crash do we begin to see the emergence of a direct link between government and the consumer. Roosevelt's New Deal set out to strengthen America's faltering liberal democracy through a planned economy that recognised consumers not simply as commercial automatons but as a key interest group capable of pulling America out of depression. "Consumers increasingly mobilized around this identity to make economic and political demands to those in power," (Cohen, 2004:27) and the introduction of scientific polling[3] gave the consumer a powerful voice in government.

In the process of institutionalising and politicising consumerism Lippmann's bewildered herd had become a powerful lobbying agent. Consumers soon found themselves on political parity with big business and labour. It was Roosevelt's contention that consumers should be "unequivocally accepted as the direct responsibility of Government [and that] the willingness to fulfil that responsibility was, in essence, an extension and amplification of the meaning and content of democratic government" (ibid:30).

Moreover, the public voice of consumers was exceptional for whom it brought together. Consumer power at this point may be said to transcend class, gender and race, as Dr. Katherine McHale told Roosevelt: "There is no interest that is more fundamental than that of consumers. All residents of our nation are consumers [...] no matter what our other interests, we all have in common one function – that of consumption" (cited in Cohen, 2004:34). In this respect the government, by taking control of the economy, had opened a pathway towards an egalitarian space for consumers. In this new space Woman's activist groups and African American activist groups were but a couple to mobilise their consumer power for political recognition and significance (ibid: 75, 83).

Whilst the demos mobilized behind its newly recognised consumer power the government itself was taking a more active role in stimulating mass consumption. The move from Say's Law of Markets to the Keynesian Paradigm further cemented the ideological principles of mass consumption. With the government taking the lead, American's would not only consume their way out of depression but in doing so they would resurrect the faltering capitalist system and

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guarantee the survival of liberal democracy over the threats of communism and fascism (Rupert, 1995:160).

During World War Two, formerly domestic and private acts of consumption became civic duties of patriotic and political importance, moreover the war, for the average American consumer was a great socio-economic leveller. Cohen (2004:69) asserts that “between 1941 and 1944 family income rose by over 24% in constant dollars, with the lowest fifth gaining three times more than the highest fifth.” One possible reason for this change in demographic came about because whilst consumers had flourished, business had come to find itself fighting its own war on two fronts. One, from the increasing power of consumers and another from the government’s creation of the Office of Price Administration and Civilian Supply (OPA) (ibid:66).[4]

Mass Consumption became further embedded in the American psyche in post war America as a means to creating post war abundance, but not only was abundance a necessary requirement for recovery after the war but on a more fundamental level it became an ideological weapon to be used in the Cold War. Mass consumption, both domestically and abroad, of American goods became the standard bearer for capitalism, egalitarianism and liberal democracy against Communism (Rupert, 1995:160).

So far then, as to the question of whether mass consumption has gradually eroded meaningful democratic politics it would appear that far from being a corrosive element mass consumption and the consumer power it generated created a more egalitarian, multi-voiced democratic citizenry with previously underrepresented groups such as Women and African Americans finding a voice that could reach the higher echelons of power. Consumerism helped steady the ship during depression, helped ensure victory in World War Two and been successfully mobilised in the ideological battle against communism!

Mass society was about to undergo another change in dynamic. In the 1960s a new generation fought against what they believed to be the manipulative marketing of corporate America. Echoing Lippmann, another political theorist Herbert Marcuse (2002), was at the forefront of the push against mass consumption and warned against the Freudian techniques used throughout the advertising industry. In an interview given in the BBC documentary *The Century of the Self* Marcuse remarked that he considered “[it a] striking phenomena to see to what extent the ruling power structures could manipulate, manage and control not only the consciousness, but also the subconscious and the unconscious of individuals.” American consumers began to reject being treated as a mass and started seeking ways to express their individuality, which, paradoxically opened up exponential growth options for the marketing industry.

As early as 1935 the *American Marketing Association* published a journal in which it was enthusiastically proclaimed that it was the responsibility of the marketing profession to bring about the ‘New America.’ The marketing industry was to ensure “the suppressed spirits of men must be given their freedom in well-rounded personalities and their healthy expression” (Hess, 1935:25). The same journal article, entitled *The New Consumption Era* informs the reader that it is the job of the marketing industry to “integrate its goods consistent with a culture which constantly gives freshness, interest and enthusiasm to goods and their uses [and that it must] bring systems of thought into existence based on humanistic science”[5] (ibid: 17). This form of marketing, which had its roots in the *Sloanism*, would evolve into the complex techniques associated with lifestyle marketing.

Lifestyle marketing was hugely successful. By determining values marketers were able to categorise the masses into distinct groups. These value groups could then be sold an individual ‘lifestyles.’ The ability to categorise society into distinct groups, with distinct motivations and desires, opened up a diverse market place for industry to sell to (Cohen, 2004: 297).

During this period of diversification America underwent a process of social segmentation. The desire and ability to construct a new home was a key driver in the post war economy but it was also driver of social stratification. As Cohen (2004a, 237-238) explains; “through their greater access to home mortgages, credit, and tax advantages, men benefited over women, whites over blacks, and middle-class Americans over working-class ones.” Mass marketing furthered this social stratification by segmenting the market into “distinctive submarkets based on gender, class, age, race, ethnicity and lifestyle” (ibid).

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Moreover, these same marketing techniques became transferrable to the political realm and as such politicians found themselves with the ability to categorise the voting public. Simply put, if consumers could be sold a lifestyle based on data derived from questionnaire designed to isolate their inner values then logic would dictate that these same techniques could be used to derive values by which to sell politics (Cohen, 2004:341).

The idea that politics can be sold evokes a common criticism of mass marketing and mass consumption (Trentmann, 2004:390-391). The charge is that this form of marketing through segmentation erodes meaningful democracy by controlling information and keeping the masses divided. This post-structuralist critique carries weight. There is little doubt, as Staats (2004:591) argues, “[that] limiting what is published or broadcast can have a profound effect upon what the individual citizen perceives to be the issues suitable and important for public discussion”

In this respect we see the importance of media campaigns. It is commonly accepted that a successful candidate must run a successful media campaign, reliant on scientific polling, focus groups, voter segmentation and vast amounts of money (Cohen, 2004:405). This would seem to imply that Lippmann and Marcuse had been right in warning against the persuasive powers of the marketing industry.

The argument set forth here is that mass consumption has changed American society at a more fundamental and structural level. So far it has been argued that society has gradually moved away from mass consumption as a civic duty to mass consumption as a personal act of self expression and that the marketing industry has been successful in identifying values that has allowed mass production to successfully sell its products to an individuated mass market.

Through this policy of market segmentation, (not too far removed from the older policy of *divide and conquer* employed by classical imperialists), corporations have become powerful and wealthy lobbyists capable of funding political campaigns. As the mass marketing industry grew the individuated public became further alienated from each other and any meaningful political process.

In the Marxist sense[6], citizens become ameliorated by advanced marketing techniques tailoring more and more to individual needs, desires and values (Marx, 2000). Consumers and politicians, (who it must not be forgotten are also consumers), come to think of themselves:

“primarily, as creatures of economics – the citizens, first and foremost as consumers of goods and services; and the political leaders, as stewards of the economy whose overarching political mission it is to insure that more and more goods and services are available to be consumed (Staat, 2004:591).”

As this process of alienation and amelioration grows, public life takes on the values and systems of the market. Strats (2004:591) offers one such example:

“We see corporate power in the increasing commodification and corporatization of sectors of society that were once considered largely separate and apart from the economic arena. Universities, once thought of as places where knowledge was passed down from one generation to another and students given the opportunity to develop their intellect and expand their worldviews, are now more and more marketing themselves along corporate lines as places where students can purchase tickets to future economic and material success.”

The example offered above gives an insight into how deeply marketing has penetrated into society. The gradual process of market penetration has created an embedded consumer ideology that has realigned societies position in relation to politics. On a societal level the power of mass marketing has limited the ability of citizens to set a political agenda. On an ideological level citizens have gradually internalised a consumer ideology, which is susceptible to marketing whether it be brand of product or brand of politics. Moreover, the alienation and amelioration experienced by a fragmented public has undermined society’s ability, politicians included, to mount any meaningful democratic political project.

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[1] Armoury practice refers to the earlier production of American rifles during the mid 19th century in which standardisation was essential to achieving interchangeability of parts (Rupert, 1995:62).

[2] 'Sloanism was a marketing strategy based on offering alternative models and price scales to appeal to different socio-economic classes. This form of flexible mass production became the industry standard (Rupert, 1995:64).

[3] Gallup polls were introduced to scientifically measure public opinion and their success in correctly predicting Roosevelt's landslide victory in 1936 changed American politics forever (Cohen, 2003: 333).

[4] After the attack on Pearl Harbour in 1942 rationing was introduced and the OPA set price ceilings for approximately 90% of all goods sold (Cohen, 2004:66).

[5] According to *The Century of Self* humanistic science during the 1960s found its greatest expression in Abraham Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* put forward in his 1943 paper *Theory of Human Motivation*. The idea of self-

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actualisation was prevalent in American society and was taken up by the marketing industry as a means to 'sell individualism'

[6] Amelioration and alienation feature prominently in Marx's earlier writings. The contrast between how Marx sees capitalism as appeasing its alienated workforce to continue producing profit and how marketing produces goods for consumers to appease their need to express their individualism is striking. (Marx, 2000)

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