European Journal of Science and Theology, *December 2015, Vol.11, No.6, 15-24*

POLICY OF LIFE CHANCES AND POLICY OF LIFE STYLES UNDER THE CONDITIONS OF CONSUMER CULTURE

Ondřej Roubal*

Vysoká škola finanční a správní, Prague 10, Estonská 500, 101 00, Czech Republic

(Received 16 July 2015, revised 29 July 2015)

Abstract

Consumer culture is considered a special type of material culture. We need to point out that the key feature of the consumer culture is the progressive transformation of the utility value of consumption objects and their symbolic significance and non-material representation shaping consumers' identity, which serves as the sources of self-reflection, changes in life styles and social distinction. We will try to depict a few ambivalent situations anchored in the principles of the consumer culture, occurring in consumers' strategies and practice of their life styles. We focus on the significance of the consumption as the universal value which should be attended by the largest possible consumer circles together with marketing communication, emancipating as part of consumer opportunities of non-personal mass market of unified products. Simultaneously, we will try to stress the rebellious manifestations of individualized consumption refusing to accept the mainstream type of consumerism with the objective to create opposing and rebelling subcultures. We observe as the original alternative icons of anti-consumerism gradually become icons of mass-popular consumption and objects of subsequent consumerism.

Keywords: ambivalence, consumerism, life style, mainstream

1. Introduction

The origin of the consumer culture is often connected with the development of western modernity of the 20th century. Constitutive feature of the consumer culture is to refer to mass production of goods and their subsequent consumption which is enabled through money exchange. Its shaping and manifestation are to correspond to other modernization processes of urbanization, secularization, industrialization or individualization.

Other authors do not accept this view and point out distinctive manifestations of the consumer culture as early as the pre-modern era. An extensive work about the consumer revolution of the 18th century English society is presented by McKendrick [1]; the historical and political scope of the

*E-mail: oroubal@centrum.cz

consumer culture is then described by Sassatelli [2]. Current work represents the anthology of studies made by Berghoff and Spiekermann [3], dealing with the current level of knowledge as regards the consumption history, extended by a number of case studies related to the consumption history in Europe and the USA.

However, it was mutually concluded that the essential feature of consumer culture is progressive transformation of the function and utility value of products and their symbolic significance and non-material representation, shaping the identity and life styles of people [4].

In other words, consumer culture constitutes the participants' ability to attribute the utility value as well as symbolic meanings to specific consumer values, co-determining both the processes of constructing one's own identity, modelling of social roles and represented through lives of subcultures or activities of social movements [5].

Symbolic meanings of consumer products also represent sources of self-reflection, serving for the interpretation of everyday activities, encouraging phantasy, causing changes in attitudes to life and at the same time forming social distinctions and representing supports of social integration. People's attitudes towards material culture are not thus based only on the needs of existential survival in terms of material fulfilment of needs, but also on the existential scope of one's existence and attributing a symbolic meaning to various material values [6]. Commodities thus represent symbolic indicators that help participants reproduce cultural aspects and structure the social space.

Consumer goods in the form of purchased commodities are subsequently 'de-commodified', in order to be used as a source and a tool to construct social and psychological scope of life. On the one hand, we observe consumers' material addiction to commodities, accompanied by growing time-related investment of participants in the acts of purchasing and utilizing things and services. In this connection, we often come across the collocation „commodification of free time" [7].

On the other hand, consumers simultaneously develop 'de-commodification' practice, deconstructing and reconstructing commodities in a non-market logic of symbolic representations in order to attribute such social and psychological significance which gives their actions true meaning and comprehensible system. In reference to C.L. Strauss, it should be noted that things have to be meant [8].

The consumption thus reflects who we are, how we want to live, what we consider meaningful and the other way round. A luxury car may thus be 'de-commodified' through the efforts to earn respect of other people, a family house might symbolize and represent family values. Shopping is not necessarily subject to fashion trends and market dictate but to active implementation of authentic life philosophy [9].

This whole process, however, is not that simple. Most studies focusing on consumer culture slightly neglect its possible ambivalent manifestations that quite explicitly manifest themselves in the living conditions of the consumers of

the late modernity era [10]. However, it is the ambivalence as inner inconsistency and dialectics of events that is one of the characteristic features of late modernity reflected in the lives of the participants interlinked with mechanisms of consumer culture and consumerism. It turns out that the contemporary forms of consumption and consumerist life styles are characterized by numerous contradictions, dynamics of internal conflicts that surely deserve more intense research work [11].

This paper focuses on some aspects of consumer culture reflecting certain ambivalent situations in the lives of consumers and their consumerist techniques. First, we want to point out the significance of the consumption as a universal value in which the largest possible consumer circles should participate with the assistance of marketing communication and emancipate in the conditions of consumerist opportunities of the non-personal mass market of unified products. Simultaneously, we want to refer to responses of rebellious displays of individualized consumption, refusing to accept the mainstream type of consumerism with the objective to create opposing and rebellious subcultures. The meaning of rebellious subcultures is identified in the search for original and authentic motives of life manifestations and strict rejection of the participation in the consumerist wheels of the mainstream production. We need to stress that cultural revolt or cultural sabotage keeps struggling with the efforts of the systems of the non-personal mass market to absorb and skilfully transform the original 'cool' motives of the rebellious counterculture into forms of consumerist conformism, which ironically enforces the principles of the mass market of universal products [12]. We observe as the original alternative icons of anti-consumerism gradually become icons of mass-popular consumption, but we also take notice of situations where non-conforming oriented consumer patterns of consumers prefer products as status property and sources of social distinction. The consumers´ efforts to distinguish themselves and to step out from the non-personal mass of 'mainstream' are motivated by competitive consumption intending to obtain such products (status property) that can be accessed only by a very limited number of customers. Such oriented consumption, however, leads to even more intensified consumerism, but in many aspects also to inefficiency of the collective actions and self-destructive behaviour of the consumers. This may result in an ambivalent life where one part comes to the fore and is represented by the symbols of success, efficiency and uniqueness, while the other part in the less visible background presents pale, rushed and unfulfilled family and private life.

2. Paper's objectives

The paper aims to point out that consumer culture does not represent any 'dark magic', manipulating and chaotically dragging hypnotized consumers struggling in the game of market forces, irrationally and passionately desiring ecstatic stimuli designed by marketing, rationally and calculatedly produced by pragmatic strategies of business companies. We try to free consumer culture

from the shadow of a negative suspicion of artfully hidden destructive forces and to put aside the often attributed *signum diabolicum* in which many social critics are searching for apocalyptic scenarios of the collapsing society of welfare. The consumer is not necessarily the object of manipulation and the product of force sui generis of the rationally functioning market pressure, or a controlled puppet hypnotized by a commercial or a passive consumer dominantly subject to superficial material motivations and incentives. We rather try to present the consumer as a reflecting participant actively shaping the discourse pattern of the consumption who is capable to go through and critically interpret his own experience and to project it in his attitudes toward the outside world. Such a consumer is able to assume responsibility for the world around him, simultaneously shaping it through his own actions.

Sociological attention is also paid to inconsistency and dialectics of situations which the contemporary consumer as an active and self-reflecting participant takes part in and has to cope with as the unintended consequences of his own actions. We try to identify and to understand some of the ambivalent moments, discreetly but firmly anchored in the coordinates of the contemporary consumer culture as well as in the lives of increasingly insecure and split consumers.

The next part of the paper aims to capture and to clarify some ambivalent manifestations of consumer culture as an environment where various forms of life styles are constituted and reconstituted and where a significant role is distinctly played by marketing communication strategies in the form of direct and indirect initiations of social and psychological effects [13]. Of course, the nature of consumer culture is also determined by new media and communication technology, which came into our lives and changed structures of value [14].

We approach the consumer culture as a system which applies (in terms of business strategies and the global effect of marketing communication) what we describe as the policy of life chances, emancipating the consumers to participate in universal consumerist values of the non-personal mass market of goods and services. The policy of life chances, however, clearly collides with the individualization tendencies of reflecting consumers and their authentic policy of life, designed as projects of original self-expression and ‘rebellious’ aversion to the anonymity of consumer ‘mainstream’. The policy of life styles, defiantly escaping the techniques of mass consumerism, is not only gradually swallowed by marketing industry in the system of the policy of life chances, thus becoming the object of commercial use. Moreover, the policy of life styles is determined by consumerist patterns of the competitive consumption, initiating new forms of consumerism, accelerating consumption and generating the potential of ineffective and non-beneficial life practices of consumers.

3. Conforming consumption and rebelling consumers

Commercial communication strategies practically and pragmatically support efficient functioning of the non-personal mass market and multiplication

of goods with the objective of economic profit. To that end, integrated marketing communication creates an illusion of easy and immediate availability and indispensability of offered products. "It is a culture, which can most likely be described as the culture of the moment, with dominating hedonistic mentality of collectors of experiences, worshippers of the instant gratification cult." [15] It aims to maximize active and regular participation in the consumption by all participants, regardless the current economic situation, sex, nationality, ethnicity etc. Global propagation and distribution of the mass offer of universal products often indicate what Giddens describes as the „emancipation policy" [16]. Its goal is to eliminate 'divergence' and differences considered the sources of mutual inequality or unequal opportunities. Expansion of global markets is to ensure that the unified products of different labels (drinks, clothing, services etc.) are spread to the largest masses of consumers. Marketing support of companies' business strategies does not intend to exclude anyone from its game. To the contrary, it is spreading the democratizing mission saying that obtaining consumer products represents a universal value which should be accessible by all consumers without limits.

The problem lies in the fact that the similar marketing-commercially shaped and consumer-oriented 'policy of life chances' collides with a more explicit confrontation with the motives of individualized consumption and unpredictable desires expressing the authenticity of consumers. The consumer behaviour of the participants often shows individualized strategies stressing the intimacy of purchase goals, interests and needs [17]. The trend based on a certain defiance against conformity and the defiantly individualized need for expressing authentic attitudes to the consumption are phenomena that have been observed in the advertising industry since as early as the 60's of the 20th century. In the background we could notice a gradually forming rebellious 'opposing culture' acting against mainstream consumerist efforts and methods, provocatively aiming to achieve originality and uniqueness.

As an example, we can use the popular advertising campaign to promote VW 'beetle' car, started early 60's of the past century. In late 50's the 'beetle' was not a very successful model in the USA; the sales were stagnating, customers were not fond of such a non-traditional and atypical design – on top of that, the car was connected with the Nazi era. It was the advertising campaign for the 'beetle' in the 60's that achieved a great success and the 'beetle' became a sought-after and demanded car by many Americans. The success of the advertising campaign was due to daring persuading the customers to purchase the 'beetle' because it is 'different', ugly and ordinary. Purchasing the 'beetle' signified the decision to part with the crowd, to distinguish oneself and to point out one's own ability to leave the line of grey mass of other consumers. The 'Beetle' became the symbol of opposing culture, defiance and represented demanded values of individualism and authenticity.

The advertising campaign for the 'beetle' and its concept along with the unhoped-for success from early 60's illustrates how the 'policy of life chances' gradually collides with the 'policy of life styles' as a regime of consumerist-

individualized 'policy of life', expressed by the narrative of self-identity and the desire to become someone else. 'The policy of life styles' can be considered a type of rebellious revolt and defiance against the conformity of mass consumerism, affecting the atmosphere of opposing culture. Countercultural defiance of non-conformism against the social system is represented by the first generation of hippies, revolting against the conformist dress-code of the majority of society, later by punk movements and hip-hop subculture. Participating in the 'policy of life styles' means to reject the ostentatious consumption by the spirit of motto 'Keeping up with the Joneses', based on the conformist adaptation to social expectations, but to accept the revolting position of hip-consumerism.

According to Heath and Potter, however, similar opposing subcultures, defining themselves against mainstream trends and shaping alternative attitudes to life, gradually cross over to the mainstream of mass consumerism [18]. They become the object of commercialization in the form of fashion trends, just as in the case of hippies or punk, whose symbolic features and constitutive elements became a profitable trade item in e.g. London boutiques as early as the 80's of the 20th century. It is no coincidence that contemporary fashion trends get obvious inspiration from the original rebellious hip-hop subculture.

Within the atmosphere of the 'mainstream defiance', flexibly responding consumer markets thus become simultaneously consolidated, oriented on consumer interests structured by the opposing culture. It would be quite interesting to observe in detail these interacting events where the system-based 'emancipating policy' of the market gradually but pragmatically diverts to the marketing strategy coming closer to the mode of 'policy of life styles' and how new consumerist practices reflecting the strategy of 'the policy of life' are being formed on the side of consumers. It turns out that individualization accents of the 'policy of life styles', following liberal and independent manifestations of consumers´ authenticity are getting stronger, more creative, less predictable and often even take bizarre shapes. It is a situation where many consumers in compliance with the expansive 'policy of life styles' pursue different variations of original life styles marked by 'cool' attributes. A whole range of emerging subcultures and rebellious groups sort of represent a desperate attempt to escape the wheels of commercial strategies and unification mainstream forces and to search for new motives of novel styles and individuality.

4. Cool hunting and competitive consumption of cultural rebels

According to some authors, the 'policy of life styles' becomes the object of increasingly elaborate techniques of commercial manipulations and marketing influence [19]. And not only this. The original active process of intensive search for authentic self-expression, distinctive display of non-conformism or other 'cool' motives of self-presentation is to be strategically, systematically and selectively thematised and reflected in the images of commercial messages. These subsequently transform and turn the authentic statements of the 'policy of life style' into a commercial product of the mainstream fashion. As mentioned

before, this took place in the case of hippies, where the features of a most informal and liberal fashion soon became the topic of fashion magazines and shop windows of renowned boutiques, and in the case of punk, the attributes of which became a favourite marketable article in London department stores.

In this context, in the USA there is a professionalized group called 'Cool – Hunters', whose task is to monitor alternative, original and non-commercial styles of the young generation which are later turned into marketable items. In other words, 'Cool Hunters' sell the authenticity of young people to companies that attach it as charms to their brand marks and commercially sell it as 'new' fashion and style to masses. The result is commercialization of the originally non-commercial concept and especially the effort of young people to search for other alternative forms of authenticity. The desire of young people for this kind of authenticity, however, often leads to slightly bizarre manifestations and extravagance.

From the sociological perspective 'Cool Hunting' is an interesting and certainly well-paid profession and it also represents an activity substantially influencing thinking and acting of young people, intervening in their world of everydayness. 'Cool Hunters' resemble 'thieves of spirits', burglars, 'stealing' from a laboriously and spontaneously created authentic world of young people just to sell it immediately for the purpose of commercial recycling. They indirectly threaten the temporary vacuum of authentic and original self-expression of the young generation which often does not accept the commercially recycled authenticity intended for the masses of consumers. Conditions are created to make young people constantly search for other alternatives of self-expression, act creatively and be able to 'search within themselves' in still unsuspected and unknown context. Their own identity is constructed and reconstructed, constantly developing in more difficult positions and angles. The self-expression often takes extreme forms; some of them may be described as socially pathological in terms of well-established cultural norms of the society. It may refer to 'untraditional' adrenaline experiences or to other often dangerous extravagant displays of one's own personality. In any case, the young generation aim to create their non-interchangeable identity on a diminishing playing area which is being ruthlessly colonized by images of commercial 'authenticity'.

The opinion that mainstream swallows subcultures and that commercial corporations co-opt opposing cultures is not supported by e.g. Heath [20]. He rejects the idea of similar 'external' interventions and by the spirit of liberal criticism he focuses on the very behaviour of consumers. He observes that the participation in the 'policy of life styles' demonstrating opposing revolt against commercial mainstream has a negative impact on all the involved, with the exception of manufactures and sellers. According to Heath, the reason is that the consumerist patters determined by the efforts to be rebellions and non-conforming go after obtaining goods characterizing the status nature. In the economic terminology it means that the status goods refer to any item distinguishing itself from the others, simultaneously helping to maintain and to

protect the social status. Goods as status property become the feature of constant comparison in the environment of other consumers. The way the consumers evaluate their own situation depends on the situation of the others they measure themselves with. Applying the 'policy of life' with the objective 'to be different' and not to stay in the unattractive grey of consumer masses shows signs of consumer competition for those items that represent the fulfilment of the ideas of 'cool' life styles and the achievement of adequate status.

The principles of competitive consumption and its application, however, bring about a number of challenging effects in the lives of the consumers.

The competitive consumption reminds us of armament race; it is immensely time/energy/finance-consuming for those who take part in those competitions. This type of consumption basically contributes to the expansion of consumerism, for as we can observe the whole cities turn into one big competition and people try to catch up with and to overtake everyone they measure themselves with in their surroundings.

It is the principle of social comparison and growing aspiration of consumers measuring their own level of consumption with the level of consumption of the reference groups representing the demanded life style and ostentatiously exposing the material symbols of success that makes Heath believe that the competitive consumption is a race destined and heading for a fall. If all consumers conform to the same strategy of the competition, i.e. purchasing more costly goods in order to maintain their status, their actions will not result in sought-after results anyway. Investment in the goods subsequently becomes a new standard, i.e. a sort of input requirement for the respective status. The competitive consumption thus results in inefficiency of collective actions. According to Frank [21], this involves situations where everyone keeps investing in the improvement of their performance in order to equal their competitors. In other words, consumer competition results in an increasing level of consumption that will reach and ideally exceed the level of consumption of those with whom the specific subjects measure. This collectively and uniformly applied strategy causes that the consumption standards increase for everyone and they end up at the beginning again, or they have to cope with the losses often resulting from this strategy (less free time, higher workload, etc.).

Another problem arises if a larger number of people decide to obtain the same status goods that were originally linked only to a limited circle of consumers trying to achieve uniqueness and social prestige. The articles originally providing the sense of exclusivity and elitism become mainstream not because they would be swallowed by the non-personal system of marketing wheels, but because they were discovered by a large number of potential buyers. As an example, we can use the concept of fashion as a purely social phenomenon trying to ensure it remains accessible only to certain people, groups and individuals while maintaining their exclusivity which excludes most of the others from this fashion style. If the fashion trends start to be applied by everyone, they will lose their status of uniqueness and cannot be regarded as fashion.

In terms of liberal criticism, the 'policy of life styles' leads to continuous spinning the wheels of competitive consumption and self-destructive behaviour of all the involved. Then, the advantage remains on the side of the goods manufacturers meeting the needs and desires of the 'rebellious' consumers.

5. Conclusions

We are trying to point out some ambivalent events occurring as part of the consumer culture. Consumer culture is a specific feature of the material culture characterized by progressive transformation of the products utility value into their symbolic and non-material significance. The purpose of the consumption does not lie only in obtaining the functional value of the products but also in utilizing their symbolic meanings as the sources constructing and reconstructing one´s identity, the choice of life styles or social distinction. The symbolic scope of products is substantially co-determined by social and psychological effects of the marketing and communication strategies. As we assume, they influence the shape of institutional and organization forms of life as well as the processes of transforming the social structures. They redefine the significance and effects of the consumption, initiate changes in the character of human relations and ensure the dynamics of changing life styles. The dynamics of consumer behaviour and the rhythm of consumer techniques, however, are not only the result of external interventions of the marketing communication, but also of the behaviour of the consumers actively participating in applying the authentic 'policy of life styles', determined by the consumer patters of competitive consumption.

Acknowledgement

This article benefited from the financial assistance under the project *Transformation of the way of life and modernization processes within the micro-region Hlučínsko*, no. GA ČR 13-23870S.

References

[1] N. McKendrick, J. Brewer and J.H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England*, Europe, London, 1982.
[2] R. Sassatelli, *Consumer Culture: History, Theory, and Politics*, Sage, London, 2007.
[3] H. Berghoff and U. Spiekermann, *Decoding modern consumer societies*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2012.
[4] Z. Bauman, *Work, Consumerism, and the New Poor*, Open University Press, Maidenhead, 2005, 26.
[5] V. Zelizer, *Culture and Consumption*, in *Economic Sociology*, N.J. Smelzer & R. Swedberg (eds.), Princeton University Press, New York, 2005, 330-350.
[6] A. Appadurai, Cult. Anthropol., **3(1)** (1988) 36–49.
[7] P. Zahrádka, *Úvod do historie, teorie a výzkumu spotřební kultury*. in *Spotřební kultura: Historie, teorie a výzkum*, P. Zahrádka (ed.), Academia, Prague, 2014, 10.

[8] R. Sassatelli, *Sociologie spotřeby: jednání, distinkce a identita,* in *Spotřební kultura: Historie, teorie a výzkum*, P. Zahrádka (ed.), Academia, Prague, 2014, 101.
[9] M. Douglas, *Thought Styles: Critical Essays on Good Taste*. Sage, London, 1996, 86.
[10] Z. Bauman, *Umění života* (*The Art of Life*), Academia, Prague, 2010, 61-102.
[11] O. Roubal and F. Zich, *Marketingová sociologie. Marketingová komunikace a moderní společnost*, Eupress, Praha, 2014, 64-71.
[12] J. Heath, Philos. Soc. Crit., **27(6)** (2001) 2.
[13] A. Ganglmair-Wooliscroft and R. Lawson, J. Happiness Stud., **13(1)** (2012) 149-166.
[14] M. Solík, J. Višňovský and J. Laluhová, Eur. J. Sci. Theol., **9(6)** (2013) 71.
[15] O. Roubal, Communication Today, **5(1)** (2014) 88.
[16] A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age.* Polity, Cambridge, 1991, 209-232.
[17] G. Lipovetsky, *Paradoxní štěstí (Le Bonheur Paradoxal*), Prostor, Prague, 2007, 46.
[18] J. Heath and A. Potter, *Nations of Rebels: Why counterculture became consumer culture*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 2004.
[19] J. Světlík, Communication Today, **2(2)** (2011) 52-66.
[20] J. Heath, *Kritika konzumerismu*, in *Spotřební kultura: Historie, teorie a výzkum*, P. Zahrádka (ed.), Academia, Prague, 2014, 332.
[21] R. Frank and B.S. Bernanke, *Ekonomie (Economy)*, Grada, Prague, 2003, 300.