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Critical Methods

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Free Thought in a Consumer Society

Since the very founding of the United States, democracy has been held as a cherished ideal central to the very essence of the American identity. It has taken form not solely as a governmental institution, but also as a mindset of liberty, justice, and equality. Although democracy is upheld as the identifying feature of this country, its condition is in peril. In his piece, *Democracy Matters*, Cornel West condemns the structure of free-market fundamentalism that dominates the American economy. He proposes the idea that capitalism and the culture of consumption are evils, which must be overcome in order to reinvigorate the value of democracy in our society. The threat of capitalism can be identified in two forms: the formation of a mindset corrupted by publicity as well as the development of an unsustainable social inequality. Through the analysis of these two aspects, it becomes clear that the only way to revive the American virtue of democracy is through a radical reordering of social perception.

West clearly identifies that consumerism is not an institution of freedom; rather, it is a system that strips away liberty to create a culture rich in “fear and insecurity” (West 4).

Consumerism begins to transform society at the root; it restructures our very values and beliefs, “glamorizing materialistic gain, narcissistic pleasure, and the pursuit of narrow individualistic preoccupations” (West 4). In “Culture Jamming”, Kalle Lasn depicts this restructuring of perception as an oppressive affliction, fueling a powerful degradation of self-worth. In a world in which capitalistic, free-market economies are fueled by media production and publicity, this “media spectacle slowly corrodes the human psyche” (Lasn 415). Media acts as a persuasive entity, orienting its audience toward consumption, and in the process, altering the mind to reflect new goals of artificiality in place of genuine thought.

In *Ways of Seeing*, Berger, through the study of art and its parallels in advertisement, analyzes the ways in which publicity act on our goals and desires. He introduces the idea that publicity sells consumers their future, more enviable selves. Berger says that the consumer’s psyche is swindled because it causes him to live “in the contradiction between what he is and what he would like to be” (Berger 148). In this way, consumerism creates an unquenchable thirst for a better and happier life. Berger continues, “publicity turns consumption into a substitute for democracy” (Berger 149). We become enslaved by this unattainable vision of ourselves, and thus, our freedom is diminished.

Suiting its name, it seems that consumerism consumes all aspects of a person’s life. Lasn observes that even “our most intimate gestures have become stereotyped” (Lasn 418). Consumerism is so pervasive because its enslaving power is seductively hidden. It presents itself as the ability to choose between a vast array of options, equivocally empowering those that participate. Lasn counters that consumerism’s allure is constructed by only “offering the illusion of unlimited choice, but in fact reducing the field of play to a choice of pre-selected experiences” (Lasn 418). In this way, consumption dehumanizes people by manipulating our very mental structure to believe we are free, when in reality, we are enslaved to the illusionary promises of publicity.

In addition to alteration of thought through publicity, capitalism also has tangible effects on the demography of society. The current system of capitalistic competition spawns a schism, driving the rich and poor to extremes as companies seek profit. This “obscene level of inequality” is unavoidably linked to the culture of narcissism that is bred by the unattainable pursuit of the better self (West 4). In effect, this leads to the glaring disparity between those that have and those that have not. As companies compete to gain economic status, the wealth of the nation becomes vastly consolidated at the top of the social ladder. West refers to this inevitable tendency as the “gangsterization of America- an unbridled grasp at power, wealth, and status” (West 8).

In “Manifesto of the Communist Party”, Marx explains how the economic schism develops. He tells us, “The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society” (Marx 476). The bourgeoisie, or the elite class, continues to advance technology in the pursuit of supremacy in a competitive economic environment. As a result, workers become les valuable as their skills and jobs are replaced by more efficient machines. Thus, the gap between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, or the working class, becomes greater and greater, alienating the working class into a lower and lower economic status. The middle class, too, is alienated as larger corporations appropriate their customers with unmatchable prices that are only achieved through large-scale production. In this way, as the elite rise higher up the social latter, a larger and more impoverished working class is created. This sets up an unsustainable system that inevitably results in a harsh division among society.

Although West views free-market fundamentalism as an evil and an unsustainable source of societal and self-corruption, he proposes that there is in fact a solution to regain democratic power. His proposal is one of critical thought. He maintains that in order to become free from the shackles of a culture of consumerism, it is imperative to adopt a philosophy of Socratic questioning. In *Gorgias*, Plato embodies Socrates’ unwillingness to accept convention without reflective evaluation. Highlighting the importance of honest dialogue, Socrates says, “I would be pleased to be refuted if I say anything untrue, and who would be pleased to refute anyone who says anything untrue” (Plato 458a)**.** Similarly, Lasn highlights the importance of reflection in the form of meditation, which he says allows one to break “ the stupefying comfortable patterns we’ve fallen into” (Lasn 420). In essence, a deliberate act of unorthodoxy is necessary to ignite one’s own sense of curiosity and genuine thought, free from the restraints that society has established. We must discard our tainted perceptions because the only way to uproot the effects of consumerism is to “make the world doubt its most cherished and unexamined beliefs” (Lasn 415).

In order to regain the liberties of democracy, it seems that a conscious personal transformation is urgently demanded. West calls this transformation an “endless quest for intellectual integrity and moral consistency” (West 16). Just as Socrates’ stressed in *Gorgias,* true freedom is achieved only through uniformity between conviction and action. Thus, our values and goals must be mirrored in our actions on a daily basis. West’s use of the word *endless* is instrumental because just as Berger explained in *Ways of Seeing*, we are constantly bombarded with media, publicity, and ideas not of our own making. Every day, a steadfast refusal to accept norms and conventions is essential to break the oppressive bonds of consumerism.

It is evident that capitalism has the power to alter not only our mindsets, but also the structure of our society as a whole. It is only through the pursuit of original thought and action that one can eject oneself from this dangerous path of consumerism. In order to change the lifestyle of current culture, people need “a willingness to take risks, and a commitment to the pursuit of small, spontaneous moments of truth” (Lasn 414). It is only through self-reflection, questioning, and spontaneity that one can truly say he is free from the constraints of consumerism. Liberation from these limitations will salvage the true democratic spirit upon which this country was founded.

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