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The structure of hip consumerism

Abstract Critics of mass culture often identify 1950s-style status competition as one of the central forces driving consumerism. Thomas Frank has challenged this view, arguing that countercultural rebellion now provides the primary source of consumerism in our society, and that 'cool' has become its central ideological expression. This paper provides a rearticulation and defense of Frank's thesis, first identifying consumerism as a type of collective action problem, then showing how the 'hip consumer' is one who adopts a free-rider strategy in this context.

Key words advertising · consumerism · cool · ideology · prisoner's dilemma · Thomas Frank

There was a time when social inequality and poverty were the most frequently criticized features of Western capitalism. It is perhaps testimony to the achievements of this economic system that for many people such problems no longer provide a source of overriding concern. Popular criticism has become increasingly focused on what were once regarded as more peripheral defects. Foremost among these defects is the problem of 'consumerism'. It has recently become fashionable, in some circles, to claim that the fight against consumerism is the most important revolutionary movement of our time. Kalle Lasn, the founder of *Adbusters* magazine, claims that 'culture jamming' – the attempt to block or subvert advertising messages – 'will become to our era what civil rights was to the '60s, what feminism was to the '70s, what environmental activism was to the '80s'.¹

But despite these grand ambitions, the critique of consumerism remains woefully imprecise. The standard version follows a very predictable narrative – what Thomas Frank has recently labeled the

'countercultural idea'.² According to this view, consumerism is associated with conformity. Business culture is monolithic, homogeneous, and hierarchical. It projects these values onto society both directly – by dominating sectors of the market – and indirectly – through advertising. Squaring off against business are the life-affirming, dionysian cultural rebels. These individuals are able to elude the mesmerizing effects of consumerism, and create their own, spontaneous, vibrant and authentic cultural communities. These pocket subcultures are profoundly subversive of the established order, yet are somehow always in danger of being absorbed into the mainstream. Thus there is a constant struggle between the two, as the counterculture subverts the mainstream, while the mainstream attempts to co-opt the subculture (e.g. by adopting its images for use in advertising, mass-producing its clothing styles, etc.).

The problem with this narrative, according to Frank, is that far from being a critique of consumerism, it is actually the central ideology of consumerism in our time. It lends aid and comfort to the idea that consumerism is a form of conformity, helping to obscure the fact that it is rebellion – not conformity – that is currently performing the 'valuable function of justifying the economy's ever-accelerating cycles of obsolescence'.³ The central figure in modern consumerism, in Frank's view, is the 'hip consumer' or the 'rebel consumer', the one who attempts to express his or her individuality through consumer choice. Thus so-called 'culture jammers' are sustaining, even glorifying, precisely the narrative that has been greasing the wheels of commerce since the early 1960s. The result, according to Frank, is that 'business is amassing great sums by charging admission to the ritual simulation of its own lynching'.⁴

Unlike much of what is written on the subject of consumerism, Frank's thesis is both challenging and original. Unfortunately, it also shares some of the defects that are endemic to this literature. First of all, it lacks a clear statement of what 'consumerism' is, choosing instead to rely upon our more dubious 'I know it when I see it' intuitions. And although it clearly takes consumerism to be a *bad thing*, there is no clear presentation or defense of the normative standards that are used in forming this judgment. This paper constitutes an attempt to remedy these two defects in Frank's argument.

What is consumerism?

The critique of consumerism has been rehearsed so many times, to so little effect, that many people's eyes begin to glaze over at the very mention of the term. Unfortunately, despite this constant stream of

denunciation, there has been very little genuine analysis of consumerism. The critique of consumerism, for example, takes three *quite* different forms, and yet these are – to my knowledge – never adequately distinguished in the literature. My first goal in this paper is therefore to separate and analyze these three critical strategies. For convenience, I will refer to them as the ideology critique, the perfectionist critique, and the liberal critique.

The ideology critique

Most critical perspectives on consumerism take as their point of departure the observation that people often spend a lot of money purchasing goods that don't actually produce lasting satisfaction or happiness. This is buttressed by the observation that, as a society, we invest an enormous amount of money in some things, like advertising, or dubious product 'enhancements' (e.g. Pepsi's 'new look, same great taste' campaign, or the \$1 billion that Gillette spent developing and launching the Mach 3 razor), while neglecting certain other important social priorities, like health, education, famine relief, and so forth. As a result, a consumerist society is thought to be one that is governed by a set of priorities that no reasonable person would endorse upon reflection.

So how is it that we, both as individuals and as a society, manage to make such bad choices? What is it that prevents us from doing what we know we should be doing? One fairly straightforward answer to this question is simply to suppose that, when we make these sorts of choices, we are exhibiting some form of practical irrationality. This is another way of saying that consumerism is a type of *ideology* – in a somewhat narrow sense of the term. According to this conception, an ideology is a system of beliefs, or a type of mental condition, that prevents agents from acting in a way that is most conducive to the attainment of their goals. There is nothing wrong with their goals per se – agents have a clear and well-ordered set of priorities – they are simply unable to translate these priorities into successful conduct, because their minds are somehow clouded.

This view of consumerism received its most forceful articulation in the 1950s by Vance Packard, whose book *The Hidden Persuaders* set the tone for much of the critical work done on consumerism in the last 50 years. Packard's lengthy *exposé* attempted to show that advertisers were using the tools of sociology and psychoanalysis to instill subconscious cravings for consumer goods in ordinary citizens – effectively circumventing any process of rational deliberation. Packard cited studies, for example, which purported to show that consumers entered into a 'hypnoidal trance' upon entering supermarkets. These poor

shoppers, he reports, 'were so entranced as they wandered about the store plucking things off shelves at random that they would bump into boxes without seeing them'.⁵

Packard's critique, with its rather extreme formulation of the claim that consumerism is driven by consumer irrationality, enjoyed much greater popularity in the heyday of psychoanalysis than it does today. But it still pops up now and again. (The claim about consumers being hypnotized, for instance, is reproduced almost verbatim – and with startling *naïveté* – by Naomi Wolf in her widely read book *The Beauty Myth*.⁶) But when stated bluntly, the problems with this hypothesis are fairly obvious. It simply strains credulity to imagine that intelligent, reflexive agents are all acting irrationally when they exhibit consumerist behaviour patterns. Quite apart from the fact that the people in question tend to take offense at the suggestion, there is a deep philosophical problem with the entire explanatory strategy. Positing widespread irrationality and error as an explanation for organized or systematic behaviour patterns tends to suggest a failure of interpretation on the part of the theorist, not a rationality deficit on the part of the actors.⁷ If it looks like people are playing baseball, then they probably are playing baseball. It doesn't make sense to say 'they're really playing cricket, but they keep making mistakes'.

Thus the attempt to explain consumerism as a sort of massive collective delusion is often a self-defeating theoretical strategy, since the ascription of irrationality to agents counts as *prima facie* evidence against any theory that draws support from such an ascription. This is not to suggest that it is impossible for such an hypothesis to be vindicated. For example, there is good reason to believe that much of the 'day-trading' that goes on in stock markets is a product of systematically flawed reasoning. But this conclusion is based upon very substantial evidence (e.g. the flawed decision heuristics in question have been reproduced in controlled laboratory settings).⁸ The point is that any critical theory that ascribes irrationality to agents automatically assumes a very substantial burden of proof. Most critics of consumerism are in no position to discharge this burden.

The perfectionist critique

If we abandon the ideology critique, then we must work with the assumption that people are, by and large, getting what they want when they act in a 'consumerist' fashion.⁹ A second critical strategy, then, is to claim that there is something wrong with what they want. After all, people choose only the apparent good, not the good itself, and so it is quite possible for them to be mistaken about what is good for them. This critique can be called perfectionist because it rests upon the claim

that the problems of consumerism can be addressed by correcting imperfections in our system of wants and needs.

The most common set of objections raised against consumerism are all perfectionist. Take, for instance, the view – popularized by John Kenneth Galbraith – that consumerism is a problem of ‘manufactured’ desire. According to this view, firms do not just satisfy existing needs and desires, but actively cultivate these needs, primarily through advertising, in order to create a market for their goods. So when people buy a particular product, they are not really acting on the basis of their own desires, but rather desires that have been instilled in them. As a result, their consumption does not improve their overall welfare, because they would have been just as well off had they never acquired the desires in the first place.

One can find examples of this argument all over the place. Take, for instance, the following passage, which is from Mark Kingwell’s recent book on happiness:

What makes a good advertiser good is precisely his or her ability to make us want something we did not previously feel any need for. . . . Advertisers are therefore the contemporary world’s leading experts at instilling desire and manufacturing longing – injecting us with images, humour and state-of-the-art graphics, as a virus might be injected via a finely tuned hypodermic needle.¹⁰

One can then criticize these manufactured needs on either intrinsic grounds (e.g. they are shallow and materialistic) or more indirectly (e.g. that the inculcation of desire outpaces the development of opportunities for satisfaction, leaving people unhappy).

The problem with this critical strategy is that it presupposes an extremely problematic distinction between our everyday desires and those that are instilled in us through advertising. The difference can be characterized in a variety of different ways. One might want to distinguish, for example, between authentic and inauthentic desires, or natural and artificial ones. This is ultimately a Romantic notion, the modern origins of which can be found quite clearly in Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. Here, Rousseau draws an invidious contrast between our ‘natural’ desires, which are all good and pure, and the ‘corrupt’ desires which are a product of the so-called ‘progress’ of civilization. Echoing this theme, Kingwell formulates the task of the critic of consumerism as one of recovery. He asks:

How do we dig beneath the layers of manipulation and distortion that blanket our ideas of happiness? Is there a residue of happiness, a substratum of genuine meaning uninfected by the viruses of technology, advertising, pathologization, narcissism and popular culture?¹¹

The short answer, in my view, is no. As an empirical classification, the distinction between authentic and inauthentic desire is nonsensical. Every desire that we have is a product of our cultural environment, and all culture is, in an important sense, artificial. The kind of food we want to eat, the housing we expect, the clothing we feel comfortable wearing, all of these desires are formed by looking around us, at the sort of things that other people have. Some people acquire these desires through exposure to advertising, others acquire them simply by seeing the object, or hearing other people talk about it, or by being given a sample at a friend's house, or by being forced to consume it by their mother. Which of these processes is the more 'natural'? It is difficult to imagine that any clear distinction can be drawn here. (Furthermore, even if we could dig down into the furthest reaches of our id to find desires that are uncontaminated by any external influences, it is nothing but a Romantic article of faith to imagine that we would actually *like* what we found.)

So the perfectionist critique cannot be grounded in an empirical distinction between natural and artificial desires. The alternative is to draw a normative distinction. The set of desires that one intends to criticize can be identified, not as a natural kind, but as one that fails to meet a certain sort of evaluative standard. Thus one might say that certain desires reflect consumerist values, and consumerist values are, in some sense, inferior to some other set. Typically, one might argue that consumerist values are shallow, materialistic, or devoid of deeper meaning. So even if people are satisfying genuine desires through their consumption behaviour, these desires are ones that, in some sense, they should not have. (This is, arguably, what is going on in the Romantic view anyhow. When people talk about 'natural' desires, 'nature' is not usually an empirical posit, but just a coded reference to a certain set of values – like simplicity, innocence, or harmony.)

The normative strategy is usually grounded in a more general distaste for capitalism, and the view that advertising must be bad, because it is produced in order to advance the private interests of corporations, and not the well-being of consumers. But while the latter point may be true, it is impossible to develop this critical strategy without issuing a *prima facie* challenge to the autonomy of consumers. No matter how nefarious corporations may be, they are nevertheless incapable of forcing people to consume their goods. They can only persuade us to consume them. So if there is something wrong with our consumption choices, it must be that we have not done a competent job of supervising our own desires and needs. (In fact, the implication is that we have been so entirely inept that a complete stranger – the cultural theorist – is able to determine, better than we are, what is really good for us.)

Because it implies a challenge to agents' autonomy, the strategy of

criticizing people's tastes, on the grounds that they reflect an inferior set of values, must be executed with extreme caution. Unfortunately, most of the work done in this vein shows no such restraint. Much of the perfectionist critique of consumerism is simply elitist – it amounts to the claim that 'my taste is better than your taste'. Thus art, theatre, fine wine, nature walks, and other consumption goods favoured by cultural elites are assigned superiority over movies, video games, beer, and football, even when the former are advertised just as heavily as the latter. Such critics, it would appear, are offended not by consumerism, but by the consumption choices made by the average consumer. In a world without advertising, it would be much easier to ignore the fact that the majority of the population has shockingly bad taste.

The more general problem with treating consumerism as a set of inferior values is that it is very difficult to produce an argument to show that one set of values is superior to another. As a result, the way that consumption preferences are ranked tends to be determined by existing status and power hierarchies. This phenomenon has been studied with great insight by Pierre Bourdieu, among others.¹² What Bourdieu argues, in his classic work *Distinction*, is that 'taste' is a social construction which is built up out of a sanctioned, and essentially non-aesthetic, distinction between 'good taste' and 'bad taste'. One of the ways to express such distinction is to stigmatize the consumption choices of out-group members as morally inferior. From this perspective, then, the idea that 'consumerism' reflects an inferior set of values must be treated with the utmost of suspicion.

In any case, this is not the most serious problem with the perfectionist critique. Suppose that we did find a way to identify a set of specifically consumerist 'values', and managed to demonstrate that these values are inferior to some other set. Even then, such an analysis could at best serve as a basis for ethical suasion, not political action. In other words, we could use this analysis as grounds to harangue our fellow citizens, and try to get them to improve their consumption choices, but we could not use it as a basis for public policy. One of the central organizing principles of a liberal political society is that the state should remain neutral on questions of the good. This is especially pressing in a pluralistic society, in which citizens are divided by deep differences of opinion on matters of fundamental philosophical or religious doctrine. Since the values that we adhere to, and the vision of the good life that we endorse, are generally derived from such doctrines, it is widely regarded as inappropriate for the state to take actions that enforce a particular conception of the good, or that in any way penalize those who do not share this conception.

From this perspective, any attempt to translate the perfectionist critique of consumerism into political action would be illiberal. It would

be to take values shared by one segment of the population and impose them on others. Regardless of how one feels about liberal neutrality, this constraint is deeply embedded in our political culture, and so any proposal that directly contravenes it is unlikely to be politically viable. As a result, if people want to be superficial, there's only so much we can do. We can try to persuade them not to be, but we cannot use state power to force their hand, or even to discourage them from this choice.

The liberal critique

This brings us then to the liberal critique of consumerism. The most distinctive feature of the liberal strategy is that it refrains entirely from criticizing people's preferences. The problem with consumerism, according to this view, is not that people have been tricked into wanting something that they should not want. The problem with consumerism is that it is a form of collectively self-defeating behaviour. This aspect of consumer behaviour is often alluded to in the literature. It is, for example, tacit in the concern that is frequently expressed about the way that advertising stimulates 'envy'. But the liberal critique is seldom stated in its full generality.

One exception to this rule is Juliet Schor's analysis of consumerism in her two books *The Overworked American* and *The Overspent American*.¹³ Schor sets out to explain how it could be that Americans, despite increasing affluence, have also suffered a decline in leisure time. This would not be mysterious if Americans simply wanted to work more. But the increase in work time has generally coincided with growing complaints about overwork. Many Americans, it turns out, are working more than they would like. In a similar vein, many are also complaining about overspending. When asked, many Americans claim that they are spending more, and saving less, than they know they should.¹⁴

According to standard microeconomic theory, genuine 'overwork' and 'overspending' are impossible. Individuals are faced with a simple tradeoff between work and leisure, or saving and spending. The more that an individual works, for example, the greater the value to her of the leisure time that she must forgo. She will decide how much to work by selecting the point at which the marginal value of an additional unit of salary is equal to the marginal value of the foregone leisure. According to this view, 'overwork' is only possible if the agent is at a point where the value of foregone leisure is higher than the value of the salary earned, and this will only occur if the agent has failed to optimize in her choice – either through irrationality, or because her work schedule was not voluntarily chosen. If neither of these conditions obtain, then complaints about overwork are just so much bellyaching.

Of course, it is possible that people are being forced to work too much. Unfortunately, this contradicts much of what we know about the character of overwork. Not only do people often choose to work overtime hours, but many of the chronically 'overworked' are professionals who exercise considerable discretion in setting their schedules. In any case, none of this could explain 'overspending', since all consumption beyond a certain basic margin of need has a self-evidently voluntary character.

The solution to the puzzle, according to Schor, lies in the fact that many consumer goods have primarily comparative value. People use their paycheques not only to purchase goods that are intrinsically desirable, but also to acquire what economists sometimes refer to as 'positional goods'. A positional good is one which derives some significant fraction of its value from a comparison with others. (In Bourdieu's terms, any good that expresses distinction would be positional.) Sometimes owning the good is used to secure a position, sometimes the good itself is intrinsically positional. For example, wanting to receive an above average grade in a class is positional, because it amounts to wanting a better grade than (roughly) the majority of other students. Whether or not one achieves this goal therefore depends upon how many others fail to achieve it (in a way that, for instance, aspiring to get a B does not).

The element of comparison in positional goods is what leads to the development of consumerism. There are many examples of positional goods that figure prominently in our society, but the most commonly noted one is status. Status is intrinsically comparative, in the same way that wanting to be above average is. And individuals often purchase goods in order to achieve status – hence the well-known phenomenon of conspicuous consumption. The problem with the quest for positional goods, according to the liberal view, is not that it is unseemly to try one-upping one's neighbors, but that when one's neighbors try to do the same the interaction has a suboptimal, or Pareto-inefficient, outcome. It is a type of prisoner's dilemma.

According to this view, the sense of dissatisfaction associated with consumerism is a consequence of the suboptimal outcome that this interaction pattern generates. Suppose that two neighbors each want to project an image of success, and that projecting such an image becomes essential to their sense of well-being. The problem, of course, with projecting an image of success is that success is entirely relative. What were considered sure signs of prosperity and success thirty years ago are now just rudimentary components of a middle-class lifestyle. The only way to project success is to appear more successful than one's neighbors – to drive a nicer car, have a larger house, and so on. Thus comparative consumption can easily become competitive consumption. And in many circumstances this competition becomes a race to the bottom.

Suppose that both neighbors are working a standard week, and driving modest sedans. However, by putting in a bit of overtime, it is possible for each to buy a more expensive car, say an SUV. Suppose further that the extra status associated with being the only one to own such a vehicle is of greater value than the foregone leisure time, and that the humiliation associated with being the only one *not* to own such a vehicle is worse than the loss of leisure. The interaction then has the structure shown in Figure 1 (value of outcome to player 1 shown first, player 2 second).

Both neighbors will decide to work harder, either to get the extra status, or just to avoid the humiliation.¹⁵ As a result, they will wind up right back where they started – both driving the same type of car, both having the same relative status – except that now they will be working harder in order to maintain their lifestyle. Thus the outcome produced through status competition is inferior, *from both of the participants' perspectives*, to the situation that initially obtained. (Notice, incidentally, that the possibilities for status competition are limited by the range of consumption goods available. The appearance of exotic new consumption goods makes it possible for individuals to distinguish themselves in a new way. Thus consumers can be harmed by the introduction of new status goods, even if they voluntarily purchase them.)

The advantage of this framework is that it provides the foundation for a critique of consumerism that does not violate the principle of liberal neutrality. What is wrong with the outcome achieved in the

		Player 2	
		Maintain status quo	Work harder, buy nicer car
Player 1	Maintain status quo	(very happy, very happy)	(humiliated, extremely happy)
	Work harder, buy nicer car	(extremely happy, humiliated)	(happy, happy)

Figure 1 Overwork as prisoner's dilemma

example above is that it is suboptimal. This means that we don't have to criticize either agent's actual preferences. There is no need to chastize them for wanting positional goods. One need only point out that, because of the competition that the quest for such goods generates, they each wind up in worse condition – from the standpoint of their own values – at the end of the day. If given the option of working less and having a more modest car, on the condition that the other did so as well, both neighbors would agree. The problem is that such agreements are unenforceable, and so both wind up with the inferior outcome of working more and spending too much.

This is why typical formulations of the problems of consumerism in terms of 'envy' are unsatisfactory. The focus on envy makes it seem as if people have 'bad' preferences, and that this is the source of consumerism. After all, we all know that envy is one of the seven deadly sins. But this distracts from the real issue. Envy becomes a problem only when it leads individuals into suboptimal interaction patterns, which it often will in cases where individuals envy each other's consumption goods. However, in order for this problem to develop it is not necessary to experience full-blown envy (in the sense that one finds the happiness of others to be a source of acute suffering). Simply wanting something because everyone else has it is enough to generate the prisoner's dilemma. Thus the problem is much broader than the analysis of consumerism in terms of envy would suggest. People often have interdependent preferences, and there are an enormous number of goods that are essentially positional – ranging from success and beauty to downtown real estate. Trying to address such a complex of cases by stigmatizing particular preferences is unlikely to have much success. The solution, if any, will be regulatory.

The key advantage of the liberal critique is that it is not paternalistic, and so does not purport to tell people what they should and should not find valuable. As a result, it remains neutral among controversial conceptions of the good, and is therefore able to serve as an appropriate basis for public action. What sort of action is contemplated here? Historically, the most common has been to impose special 'sumptuary' taxes on luxury goods, or goods that form a part of conspicuous consumption complexes. A more far-reaching solution to the problem of overwork is simply to impose a more progressive income tax.¹⁶ This will be efficiency-promoting, insofar as it penalizes agents for adopting the 'non-cooperative' strategy in prisoner's dilemmas like the one shown above. Similarly, government might choose to place restrictions on certain types of advertising, or at least cease to treat it as a tax-deductible business expense. The important point, in all these cases, is the rationale. What motivates the intervention is the desire to correct for a certain type of inefficiency. Thus it represents an intervention that

all consumers can, in principle, support, regardless of the consumption preferences they have.

What is hip consumerism?

With this analysis in hand, we can now turn to the question of hip consumerism. The syndrome of 'keeping up with the Joneses' that Schor identifies as the source of consumer dissatisfaction is quite familiar to us. But the type of status competition it describes is somewhat anachronistic. The 'classic' syndrome of conspicuous consumption – in which consumers simply try to show that they are richer than one another – has a sort of 1950s feel to it. The set of values underlying this type of competition was subjected to sustained cultural criticism throughout the 1960s, to the point where classic status competition is no longer regarded as acceptable behavior among large segments of the population. Despite a partial reversal in the 1980s, our values are now firmly aligned against this specific form of consumerism. (For example, an acquaintance of mine, whose attitudes toward social status apparently gelled sometime in the early 1950s, once proudly announced to me that she never bought anything on sale. This sentiment is so entirely out of touch with contemporary values that it took me several days to even figure out what she meant.)

However, one can see that the 1950s style of comparative consumption still plays an important role in the narrative of the 'counter-cultural idea'. According to this view, consumerism is about conformity. In order to move up a conventional status hierarchy, one must try as much as possible to conform to the set of prevailing social expectations. In order to move up the corporate ladder, one must become a generic 'organizational man'; in order to move up the social ladder, one must have the right sort of house in the right sort of neighborhood, wear the right sort of clothes, send one's kids to the right schools, and so forth. This compulsive desire to fit in, in order to advance socially, when translated into demand for goods, supposedly generates the classic syndrome of consumerism.

The problem with this view, according to Frank, is that most American status hierarchies stopped working this way more than 30 years ago. The ideal of a home in the suburbs, with 2.3 children and a station wagon, is almost never spoken of without irony. The style of 'better living' advertising that worked well in the 1950s, which encouraged people to consume in order to impress their neighbors, and to project an image of domestic harmony, become moribund a long time ago. In the early 1960s advertising agencies began encouraging consumers *not* to fit in, but to rebel, to express their individuality through

their consumption choices. And far from being an attempt to co-opt a rebellious and individualistic counterculture, this movement in advertising often predated the formation of the relevant subcultures.

The most clear-cut example of this is the VW bug, which became one of the most prominent symbols of the hippie counterculture of the late 1960s. This was entirely a product of effective advertising. At the end of the 1950s, most Americans thought the beetle was ugly, and associated it primarily with the Nazis. The car's fortunes in America were turned around by a now-famous advertising campaign, which began in 1961, that encouraged consumers to buy bugs precisely because they were ugly, unglamorous, and square. Buying a bug was a way of standing out from the crowd, rebelling against the big three automakers and their programs of planned obsolescence. It was a way of taking a stand against consumerism.

In this way, the classic critique of consumerism was itself used as a way to sell cars, with enormous success. What explains this success? This is Frank's key observation. Wanting to be a rebel, an individual, to stand out from the crowd, is also an *intrinsically positional good*. It is a way of expressing distinction. If everyone else is going to be wearing a suit and tie, then showing up in casual dress is a way to appear more relaxed, personable, and fun than everyone else. If everyone has an Oldsmobile, then driving a bug makes you stand out; it seems fresh, hip, cool (or as we would now say: irreverent, quirky, edgy). Of course, when everyone else joins in the rebellion, the effect is lost. So the individualist has to come up with some new way to stand out from the crowd. And, often enough, this will involve buying something new. Thus individualism generates its own cycles of obsolescence, and generates its own form of competitive consumption.

At one time, a man could get along fine with just three good suits. But the need to express one's individuality through clothing demands a much larger wardrobe. The man in the sensible suit is now labeled a conformist, and becomes an object of contempt and derision. The individualist, or the rebel, is smarter. He can break all the rules, and still get ahead. (After all, the guy who 'breaks the company dress code' must be really hot stuff, otherwise they would have fired him long ago.) Thus the classic critique of consumerism, expressed in the 'countercultural idea', becomes the primary mechanism through which cultural elites express distinction, and assign low status to the consumption choices of the majority.

According to Frank, this is how rebellion became the new form of consumerism:

No longer would Americans buy to fit in or impress the Joneses, but to demonstrate that they were wise to the game, to express their revulsion with the artifice and conformity of consumerism. The enthusiastic discovery of

the counterculture by the branches of American business studied here marked the consolidation of a new species of hip consumerism, a cultural perpetual-motion machine in which disgust with the falseness, shoddiness, and everyday oppressions of consumer society could be enlisted to drive the ever-accelerating wheels of consumption.¹⁷

Thus striving to be a rebel, or a non-conformist, now plays the same role in sustaining consumerist behavior patterns that 'keeping up with the Joneses' played in the 1950s. In both cases, agents are attempting to achieve positional goods through consumption. In both cases, this behavior is collectively self-defeating, but generates a cycle of competitive consumption that is quite beneficial for those supplying the relevant consumer goods.

The way that competitive consumption can escalate is reflected in the idea that subcultures are 'co-opted' by the mainstream. The myth that such cooptation occurs stems from a failure to recognize the positional natures of the goods that are being sought. The problem is not that corporations co-opt countercultures, it is that rebelling through style or consumption is collectively self-defeating (in the same way that conspicuous consumption was). Owning a Mercedes 20 years ago in North America conveyed enormous status. Now that they can be purchased through any Chrysler dealership, they aren't such a big deal. Similarly, being a fan of the band REM 15 years ago conferred enormous status upon the listener, whereas now it means nothing. Originally, the cachet lay in being one of a small number of people who knew about a good band (which showed that one had the right sort of connections, was part of the right 'scene', etc.). The problem is that as more people achieve this, the status associated with it declines. So eventually the band comes to be seen as a 'sell-out', even if their sound does not change one bit. Thus co-optation is not something that corporations do, from the outside, it is an endogenous effect produced by consumers, a logical consequence of many people seeking to obtain the same positional good. (It would be nice always to drive down uncongested freeways, or hike through untouched wilderness, or enjoy the work of fantastic 'underground' artists. In the same way, it would be nice if, like the children of Lake Wobegon, we could all be above average. Unfortunately, everyone wanting it precludes everyone getting it.)

The form of status that hip consumers are striving for is neatly captured by the term 'cool'. In fact, one can think of 'cool' as the central status hierarchy in contemporary urban society. The fact that cool is so ineffable reflects its character as a positional good. As soon as other people find out about what is cool, then one has to move on. For example, seriously cool people in New York City are always dismayed when their favorite new restaurant or club gets a write-up in the *Village Voice*. Those on the inside track initially would have gotten to know

about the place through word of mouth, and so their presence there conferred enormous status. However, once it appears in the *Voice*, then a predictable flood of 'yuppies' begin to arrive, ruining it for everyone else.

The fact that cool people display an ironic attitude towards consumption, and are sometimes even vocal critics of consumerism, does not mean that they are not engaged in consumerist behavior. Often this is concealed by the fact that their consumer behavior is dominated by negative preferences, as with people who would not be caught dead driving a Saturn, or eating at Burger King, or listening to Celine Dion, because doing so would be too 'mainstream'. This is a comparative preference structure – the good is disliked because too many others enjoy it. It therefore fails to express distinction. Whenever such a comparative preference structure is in place, it has the potential to generate the type of collectively self-defeating behavior that liberals identify as the central form of consumerism.

Conclusion

So what do we learn from all this? Consumerism was initially identified as an explanation for the fact that the consumption choices we make, either as individuals or as a society, often do not reflect our more considered judgments about what is valuable (or even desirable). I then examined three different ways of explaining this phenomenon: that people are irrational, that they are brainwashed by advertising, or that they are stuck in a type of prisoner's dilemma. The latter explanation was favored, not only because it is more charitable towards consumers, but because it generates a critique based on normative standards that are able to motivate legitimate political action within the context of a liberal society.

Following this discussion, I then picked up on Frank's suggestion that the primary force driving consumerism in contemporary society is not the desire to conform, but rather the requirement that one's consumption choices reflect one's individuality. This aspect of consumerism is most often overlooked simply because most critics adhere to a perfectionist analysis, and therefore think that consumerism is a consequence of people having the wrong sort of values. Because rebels and subversives have the 'right' set of values, and they are too reflexive to be duped by advertising, they are therefore thought to be incapable of promoting consumerism. But the liberal analysis reveals consumerism to be a behavior pattern, grounded in comparative preferences, not a set of values. And 'rebel consumers', in so far as they strive to be cool, do have comparative preferences, and so their purchasing decisions are

likely to generate the type of overall pattern that was initially identified as consumerist.

What are the consequences of this analysis? First, we need seriously to rethink the standard narrative of rebellion and conformity that we have inherited from the 1960s. Much of what gets identified as rebellion is just status-seeking, and status competition is usually a negative-sum game. We also need to stop trying to assign corporations all the blame for consumerism. Consumerism is, first and foremost, a product of consumer behavior. The idea that there is some kind of 'them', opposed to 'us', is a fiction, a part of the 'countercultural idea'. This fiction has become so transparent in recent years it is hard to see how the pretence could become more absurd. Which is more ridiculous? Kurt Cobain on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, wearing a T-shirt that says 'Corporate magazines still suck', or Alexander McQueen, the ultimate sartorial 'subversive', becoming chief designer at the House of Givenchy? Is it possible to interpret these events as evidence that 'the system' is able to co-opt dissent? No. What it really shows is just that dissent *is* the system. Capitalism simply does not require hierarchy or cultural hegemony in order to function smoothly.

So what can be done? A few suggestions were made earlier about policy initiatives that could be undertaken, based on the liberal critique. But within the context of a highly individualistic society, there is only so much that we can hope to accomplish. Only when we learn to feel comfortable, once again, wearing uniforms, will consumerism be vanquished. Of course, this is something that is extremely unlikely to occur. And so I would propose a second-best solution. If we persist in valuing individuality and non-conformity, then we must learn to stop complaining about the consequences of this decision – one of which will be that we live in a consumerist society.

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Notes

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- 1 Kalle Lasn, *Culture Jam* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1999), p. xi.
- 2 Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 14–15.

- 3 Thomas Frank, 'Alternative to What?' in Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland (eds) *Commodify Your Dissent* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), p. 151.
- 4 *ibid.*, p. 153.
- 5 Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: David McKay, 1957), p. 107.
- 6 Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (London: Vintage, 1991), p. 83.
- 7 See Donald Davidson, 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', in *Essays on Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984). See also Joseph Heath, 'Problems in the Theory of Ideology', in James Bohman and William Rehg (eds) *Pragmatism and Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).
- 8 For an overview of the sort of research in question, see Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic and Amos Tversky, *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). See also Thomas Gilovich, *How We Know What Isn't So* (New York: Free Press, 1991).
- 9 As James Twitchell puts it, 'Consumers are rational. They are often fully aware that they are more interested in consuming aura than objects, sizzle than steak, meaning than material, packaging than product. In fact, if you ask them – as academic critics are usually loathe to do – they are quite candid in explaining that the Nike swoosh, the Polo pony, and Guess? label, the DKNY logo are what they are after. They are not duped by advertising, packaging, branding, fashion, or merchandising. They actively seek and enjoy what surrounds the object, especially when they are young.' *Lead Us Into Temptation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 22.
- 10 Mark Kingwell, *Better Living* (Toronto: Penguin, 1998), pp. 178–9.
- 11 *ibid.*, p. 304.
- 12 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).
- 13 Juliet B. Schor, *The Overworked American* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); *idem*, *The Overspent American* (New York: Basic Books, 1998).
- 14 Schor, *The Overspent American*, p. 20.
- 15 Schor makes the important point that a lot of competitive consumption is 'defensive' in nature. The goal is not to beat one's neighbors, but simply to avoid loss of face. *The Overspent American*, p. 19. This lends considerable support to the claim that consumerism has a prisoner's dilemma-like structure. For further analysis of consumerism as a type of prisoner's dilemma, see Robert H. Frank, *Luxury Fever* (New York: Free Press, 1999).
- 16 For a more fully articulated proposal along these lines, see Robert Frank, *Luxury Fever*, pp. 211–26
- 17 Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool*, p. 31.