

Man the Consumer

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Using a variety of documents and sources, Louis Pinto traces the genesis of the category of “the consumer” as a central feature of market economy and society. But in doing so, he risks downplaying the insights of critical theory and the opportunities for politicization tied to this distinct form of social participation.

On Louis Pinto, *L'invention du consommateur* (The Invention of the Consumer), PUF, Le lien social, 2018. 300 p., 25 €.

In the early 1980s, Luc Boltanski suggested that Louis Pinto choose a topic that was “a little dirty, a little weird”¹: thus Pinto began his work on consumer associations. In *L'invention du consommateur* (The Invention of the Consumer), Pinto brings together his various writings on consumption,² explaining the thread connecting them and adding a chapter on the critique of consumer society. The book draws on a range of empirical studies: a study based on interviews with activists in consumer associations, an analysis of the journal *Que choisir?* (What to Choose?), an examination of a ministerial commission on consumption, an analysis of critiques of consumer society, and a study of vendors' manuals.

What is the common denominator beneath such different sociological approaches and materials? They represent different ways of instituting the consumer as the primary economic agent in market economies, thus contributing to a liberal representation of society that is

¹ https://www.canal-u.tv/video/site_pouchet_cnrs/la_consommation_de_construction_et_construction.41861

² “Du ‘pépin’ au litige de consommation. Une étude du sens juridique ordinaire,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 1989/76-77; “Le consommateur comme agent économique et acteur politique,” *Revue française de sociologie*, XXI, 1990; “La gestion d’un label politique: la consommation,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 1984/55; “La construction sociale d’une fiction juridique: le consommateur (1973-1993),” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 2013/99; and “La civilité marchande. Agressivité et retenue professionnelle dans les activités de vente,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 2013/199.

ideological yet depoliticized. Three factors play into the “invention of the consumer”: the development of critical theories of consumption, the consumer movement, and the emergence of consumer law.

Consumer Society and the Institutionalization of the Consuming Individual

At a time of strong economic growth, critical social theories appeared in the 1960s and '70s that questioned the idea of achieving wellbeing through consumption, denounced the absurdities of the economic system, and challenged the illusion of individual choice, which seemed, in reality, to be manipulated by producers. This was the thesis advanced by John Kenneth Galbraith in *The Affluent Society* (1961), which demonstrated that production continued to dominate capitalism and that consumption was nothing more than demand corresponding to production, spurred on by advertising. Consumption was influenced by the “hidden persuaders,” the title of a book by Vance Packard (1957), which denounced the necessary waste and social conformity resulting from consumption and rampant advertising. Philosophers also analyzed the illusions of consumer happiness. In the wake of Henri Bergson who, in 1932, belittled the “concern for comfort and luxury which has apparently become the main preoccupation of humanity” (p. 45), Arendt distinguished the proper use of things (“which one uses”) from consumption, which makes it “impossible to experience true pleasure” (p. 49) and regretfully announced the “specter of a genuine consumer society” (p. 48).

In France, beginning in the late 1950s, the critique of consumption developed around three poles: thinkers of alienation, analysts of the evolution of the working class, and “hermeneuticists of daily life” (p. 68). The first pole consisted of philosophers (Lefort, Lyotard, Goldman, Naville, Gorz, and so on) who closely read Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and transposed its concept of alienation onto the realm of consumption. Alienation no longer referred to deprivation of the fruit of one’s labor, but deprivation of one’s desire. Workers in an affluent society were the first to be affected by this alienating illusion—though curiously, Pinto ironically observes, “intellectuals were not affected” (p. 63). For this new working class, surrendering to the pleasures of consumption could lead to misfortune. This is what happens to Martine, the young heroine of Elsa Triolet’s *Roses à crédit* (*Roses on Credit*, 1959): her taste for dining room sets and her repeated assertion “I will own a spring mattress”³ spell her doom. Finally, the thinkers of daily life, including Lefebvre, Barthes, Baudrillard, and Debord, would make the idea of alienation-through-consumption their own, adding “a kind of spontaneous phenomenology of things” (p. 75) that equated consumption with a form of symbolic exchange. Thus the use value of

³ Elsa Triolet, *Roses à crédit*, Folio, Gallimard, 1959, p. 88.

goods becomes, according to Baudrillard, secondary to their symbolic value. The automobile—the Citroën DS (or *déesse*, i.e., “goddess”) of Barthes’ *Mythologies*⁴—was the embodiment of this idea.

This critical movement is evident in the slogans of May ’68, such as “Consume more, live less” (p. 80). Next, it reached wider intellectual circles, such as left Christians and critical economists, feeding into the critique of “consumer society,” i.e., an affluent society in which needs are constantly being increased and renewed by producers. In this way, the consumer became the most representative social figure, characterized by aspirations that were insatiable, blind (when the individualistic quest for pleasure stands in the way of any concern for the common good), and illusory (since consumers only desire images). Yet these preferences and practices were never studied empirically, and this critical perspective tainted its object, conveying, according to Pinto, a form of class contempt, implying that only intellectuals could elude consumption’s spell. These critical theories referred to a new consumer considered typical of consumer society yet who was difficult to situate socially, while neglecting, for instance, differences tied to social position. The consumer became a theoretical fiction informing another abstraction, that of a society based entirely on individual behavior. This, according to Pinto, is the paradox of the critique of consumer society, which imagined its program to be more revolutionary than it really was.

The ambivalence of consumer movements

After 1968, consumer associations became sites for the active contestation of consumption society. The project of defending consumers was, from the outset, ambiguous in its goals, halfway between a challenge to the social order and a desire to defend consumers’ interests. This ambiguity is reflected in *Que choisir*’s editorial line. In the early 1970s, this militant and politically engaged magazine sought to be a counterpower by bringing to light scandals and collusion between major corporations and the government. Its critique was all-encompassing, connecting consumption to collective questions such as the environment, health, security, and the distribution—and even the very concept—of wealth. It went so far as to assert: “our society is no longer a consumers’ society” (1974, p. 101). By the late 1970s, in a political context marked by the resurgence of economic liberalism, its positions began to evolve: it became more technical and less militant, shifting towards informed advice to consumers.

Consumer associations, which can be trade-unionist, familial, working-class, or cooperativist in their orientation, have also contributed to the consumer’s social image. Pinto analyzes two such associations, the Union Fédérale des Consommateurs (Federal Union of

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Point Seuil, 1957, p. 141.

Consumers, or UFC) and the Confédération Syndicale du Cadre de Vie (Union Confederation of Living Conditions, or CSCV) through an empirical study based on interviews conducted over two periods (1984-1987 and 1995-1996). Though most of the UFC's activists are on the left, they nevertheless keep politics at a considerable distance. Consumerism seeks to be a focused and pragmatic form of action. This tendency is even more pronounced among the CSCV's activists, the majority of whom are women. They show some reticence towards the "political" side of their activism, preferring to concentrate on local action focused on their communities and daily lives. Thus while some activists have past partisan affiliations or use highly political language, the majority does not; instead, it devotes itself to defending the consumer, in an effort to shape and rebalance, in the consumer's favor, one aspect of market relations—that of demand.

Consumer movements have thus contributed to establishing the consumer in the public space. Having once been individuals who challenged the established order, consumers are now seen as vigilant individuals who must become better informed about their choices, the quality of products, and their individual rights. Rather than being viewed from the political angle of the "alienated consumer," the consumer is now seen from the depoliticized perspective of the "vigilant consumer," whose insight and opportunities for choice must be improved. The idea of a vigilant consumer is never too far from a more critical discourse, but it is ambivalent, as it also allows the radical implications of such critique to be neutralized by inscribing them into a range of individual conduct. On the one hand, scandals denounced by these associations have an impact in the media and occasionally on legislation and can serve as a counterpower; on the other hand, the defense of consumers remains grounded in an individualistic outlook.

The Legal and Political Construction of the Consumer

As the consumer-advocacy press and associations took off, consumption became increasingly ensconced: the creation of a Consumption Bureau in the National Economy Ministry in 1945, the National Consumption Committee in 1960, the National Consumption Institute (Institut National de la Consommation, INC) in 1966, a junior ministry (*secrétariat d'État*) for consumption in 1976, and, finally, a Ministry for Consumption in 1981 (though it returned to being a junior ministry in 1983). Between 1983 and 1986, Pinto conducted a field study of a consumption task force. Consumption became a public label without a clear identification of its corresponding political reality: policies sought primarily to favor the expression of consumer representatives and promote the emergence of consumer law.

Beginning in the 1980s, consumer rights began to develop as a way of structuring the market in ways that would inform and protect consumers. They bolstered, in this way, a worldview founded on consumers' decisions. They posed no obstacles to the market's functioning but guaranteed, rather, "free and unfettered" competition: this included protections against situations of forced sale (which is contrary to the principle that markets are freely entered into), information on product quality (the principle of market transparency), and the organization of credit (to prevent sellers from abusing their power over consumers). This legal regulation was, needless to say, limited. Excessive regulation would limit the consumer's freedom. It was out of the question to make credit authorization contingent on the kinds of products being purchased, such as luxury goods or basic needs (housing, health, transportation), though the latter was proposed by a member of parliament named Louis Darinot, who sought to link a social credit policy to the defense of working-class consumers (1977, p. 228).

Pinto ends his book by considering the consumer's counterpart, the salesman, through sales manuals, seen as reflections of a "commercial civility." Salesmen are encouraged to behave with restraint towards customers and to suppress their commercial interests. Despite the fact that, according to the liberal conception, advantages from exchange should be mutual, manuals encourage salesmen to euphemize expressions of their interest, suggesting that each sides' gains are not entirely equal and that the consumer's decision to buy is somewhat forced. This professionalization of sales brought some oversight to a concrete market where consumers and suppliers meet.

Consumption: Collective Choice or Consumer's Choice?

The common denominator between these three perspectives is an attempt to make the consumer's choice a theoretical focal point and to contribute to legitimating and instituting a form of society. Thus "alienated consumers" are those who, because they have been dispossessed of their desire, cannot express their genuine choices: freeing them from the manipulation to which they are prone means allowing them to express their own choices. Similarly, the consumer movement seeks to defend the possibility of enlightened choice, just as consumer law seeks to protect consumers from excessive power. These representations thus nurture the emergence, in public and political space, of an ideal of liberal society in which the economy rests on individual decisions, starting with consumption-related decisions.

Critical theories cannot, however, be simply reduced to their weaknesses, which the book rightly lists: the abstract image of the consumer, the lack of empirical studies, class domination, and the downplaying of persistent inequality. In fairness, it should also be emphasized that they call attention to consumption's political dimension. Consumption can

take on a collective dimension, as when *Que Choisir* asks its readers to privilege use over ownership and to promote “common laundry rooms” (p. 101), or even a directly public or political dimension, as when a lack of choice for consumers corresponds to a political decision (such as when the advent of the automobile resulted in the closure of train lines). An interrogation of needs cannot be reduced simply to an effect of the intellectual’s elevated position; the point is that consumption must be seen as a political question, one that is the object of debate, whether in determining which needs to prioritize or the best ways to satisfy them.

Finally, the book would undoubtedly benefit from a more precise explanation of the connection between the triumph of the “neoliberal economic doxa” (p. 108), the primacy of liberal economic policies, and the invention of the consumer. What is the array of political, historical, theoretical, and ideological factors that led to liberalism’s triumph as a worldview and economic policy’s guiding principle? It might be useful to take a detour through the economic theories that led to the triumph of the neoclassical model, founded on the microeconomic behavior of consumers and producers, at the expense of classical, neo-Marxist, and post-Keynesian perspectives, which have since been marginalized.

In these ways, the consumer has established itself as the image of the economic individual, at the same time as economic liberalism has continued its advance. In this sense, to speak of a “society of consumers” is to make consumption a purely individual question. At present, the ecological question could re-politicize consumption at a time when urgent environmental concerns stoke doubts as to the appropriateness of relegating consumption entirely to individual choice.

Further reading:

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