

# **The Sovereign Consumer**

**Yin-man Alice Chow**

## Overview

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, most people lived in the countryside and consumed what they or their close neighbours produced. Consumption was closely linked to the process of production and the 'Consumer' as an independent person from the 'Producer' did not exist. Under the Industrial Revolution, particularly since the onset of Fordism, production became a process by which standardised commodities were produced in massive quantities, thus requiring the support of mass consumption. The processes of production and consumption were divorced. The 'Consumer' enters the picture. Advertising then came into play to further increase the desire of consumption in order to support mass consumption, hence mass production. (1)

With the change from Fordism to the current flexible regime in the second half of the twentieth century, the production of massive standardised commodities is replaced to a large extent by the production of a variety of niche products, which can also include signs, symbols and events, to suit the varied needs and desires of consumers. With this change in production, consumption is aestheticized and includes the satisfaction of fantasy and newness. In line with this development, the Marketplace all around the world is increasingly transformed to shopping malls and supermarkets, which are constructed to display and make available an abundance of consumer products, to manipulate consumers into purchasing more than what they had intended. The modern shopping mall is a dream world and shopping has become the ideal way of life. This has an effect on how people see the world, as people living in dreams are incapable of taking hold of their own lives. (2)

The phenomenon of the Consumer has caused some controversies. On the one hand, it seems taken for granted that the Consumer reigns supreme with clichés such as 'The Customer's always right'. On the other hand, consumer concern groups raise issues and accusations almost everyday about bad or even illegal business practices that blatantly manipulate and exploit consumers.

John Fiske, in discussing issues around the consumer and consumption, believed that far from being manipulated and exploited, the consumers had been able to use commodities on their own terms, giving their own meaning to commodities rather than accepting what was given. Further the consumers could also use the shopping space to their own advantage without having to make purchases. His concept of 'semiotic democracy' (John Fiske, *Television Culture* p 236), which was proposed in context of television culture, also apply to shopping and consumption.

Another scholar, Aleridge, disagreed with Fiske and thought that the latter's approach was an unintentional alignment with right-wing celebration of the sovereign consumer. He considered Fiske's concept of Semiotic Democracy a myth: 'Semiotic democracy is the free market in expressive mode' and both were myths' (Aleridge 2003, p.90).

(1), (2) Source: CUS 501 lecture notes by Ma Kok Ming, 2008

Tim Edwards, in discussing contemporary shopping experience, also raised a concern over consumption: 'the simultaneous tempting and excluding of the lost and impoverished for whom shopping is experienced as a window through which they are invited to look and a door through which they cannot enter' (Edwards 2000, p. 124). While Edwards did not directly attack Fiske's views, he obviously did not think that those consumers who were 'lost and impoverished' were able to turn consumerism to their own advantages.

This paper will consider John Fiske's views in light of Aleridge's criticisms and Edwards' discussions on contemporary shopping experience. Whatever validity there might be Fiske's views back in the 1980's, I would argue that it is no longer true today. Consumers nowadays are subject to relentless manipulation, and the bubble of consumerism that has resulted is the root of the problem that caused the current financial crisis.

### **Semiotic Democracy - Power and Resistance**

John Fiske is a scholar on popular culture and media culture. He has written widely on these subjects. In his book, 'Understanding Popular Culture' and in the article 'Shopping for Pleasure, Malls, Power and Resistance', both from 1989, he expounded his views on the power of the consumer:

'Shopping malls and the cultural practices .....are key arenas of struggle ..... Shopping is the crisis of consumerism: it is where the art and tricks of the weak can inflict most damage on, and exert most power over, the strategic interests of the powerful.' (John Fiske, Shopping for Pleasure, The Consumer Society Reader p. 307, 1989)

His arguments drew on a study done by Pressdee in 1986 on unemployed youth in the town of Elizabeth in Southern Australia, which showed that the unemployed young people visited the mall frequently and in large numbers to 'show' themselves but with no intention to buy. Pressdee described this as 'proletarian shopping', whereby 'the youths consumed images and space instead of commodities'. John Fiske referred to these youths as "'tricksters'" in de Certeau's terms:

'...tricks and ruses are the art of the weak that enables them to exploit their understanding of the rules of the system, and to turn it to their advantage.' (John Fiske, Shopping for Pleasure The Consumer Society Reader P. 309, 1989)

He saw a deeper meaning in these acts rather than simple childishness and idleness:

'With no money but much time to spend, they consumed the place and the images, but not the commodities. They turned the place of the mall into their space to enact their oppositional culture, to maintain and assert their social difference and their subordinated but hostile social identities.' (John Fiske, Understanding Popular Culture p. 38, 1989)

He called attention to other groups of 'tricky' users of the mall as well - lunch time browsers, mothers taking children to play there in the summer, older people taking daily walks there during winter - who were able to exploit the mall space to their advantage.

He also cited various scholars in discussions on use-value and exchange-value of commodities and made the points that:

‘The function of commodities, then, is not just to meet individual needs, but also to relate the individual to the social order. Consumption is not just the end-point of the economic chain that began with production, but a system of exchange, a language in which commodities are goods to think with in a semiotic system that precedes the individual’ (John Fiske, *Shopping for Pleasure*, *The Consumer Society Reader* p. 319, 1989).

‘The active semiotic use of commodities blurs the distinction between use-value and exchange-value....The values of commodities can be transformed by the practices of their users.....In the practices of consumption the commodity system is exposed to the power of the consumer, for the power of the system is..... always a flux of conflicting powers and resistances.’ (John Fiske, *Shopping for Pleasure*, *The Consumer Society Reader* p. 320, 1989)

In a separate context of discussion on television in popular culture, Fiske raised the concepts of “semiotic democracy” - ‘delegation of production of meanings and pleasures to its viewers’ (John Fiske, *Television Culture* p. 236, 1987) and ‘semiotic power’ - ‘the power to make meaning’ (John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* p.10, 1989). These concepts can be more generally applicable to other consumers. He viewed the semiotic power as the basis of what he called ‘semiotic resistance’, and thought it was crucial to social changes:

‘The power to think differently, the power to make different sense of social experience, of oneself and of one’s social relations, is the power to resist the ideological and hegemonic practice of constructing us all as subjects of bourgeois patriarchal capitalism.’ (John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* p. 179, 1989)

Therefore, he did not believe consumption and consumerism were social problems necessarily:

‘Consumption is not necessarily evidence of the desire for ownership of commodities for its own sake .... But is rather a symptom of the need for control... The problem facing the left is not how to turn people away from consumerism, but how to devise new ways in which the legitimate, and admirable, needs and desires appropriated by consumer goods can be met, ....the left does not help its cause by devaluing, denigrating or ignoring the ... everyday practices by which people in subordinated social formations win tricks against the system ...such tricks are tactical victories that maintain the morale of the subordinate, and may well produce real gains in their cultural and social experience.’ (John Fiske, *Shopping for Pleasure*, *The Consumer Society Reader* p. 320-321, 1989)

### **Views on Semiotic Democracy**

John Fiske’s views relating to semiotic democracy are supported by John Storey, a professor of Cultural Studies. In his discussions on “Shopping as a Popular Culture” John Storey said:

‘Shopping is not a passive ritual of subjugation to the power of consumerism. The “truth” of consumption is made and remade in the actual act(s) of shopping.’ (John Storey, *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture* p. 150, 2003)

He further elaborated on Fiske's views:

'Semiotic resistance, he (John Fiske) argues, has the effect of undermining capitalism's attempt at ideological homogeneity: dominant meanings are challenged by subordinated meanings; thus, the dominant class's intellectual and moral leadership is challenged.' (John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* p. 158, 2006)

On the other hand, Alan Aldridge, a scholar in Sociology of Culture, refuted John Fiske's ideas in the book 'Consumption' (2003):

'...a succession of small victories for consumer guerrillas, scarcely add up to the defeat of commodification....While seemingly radical and liberating, his approach unintentionally aligns itself with right-wing celebration of the sovereign consumer...Semiotic democracy is the free market in expressive mode. Both are myths.' (Alan Aldridge, *Consumption* p. 90, 2003).

Another issue Aldridge raised in 'Consumption' is the relationship between consumerism and citizenship, which he considered problematic:

'The neo-liberal right equates citizens and consumers. Its project is to transform all social relationships into market exchanges. The neo-liberal left has stretched the concept of consumer towards the citizen by embracing socially aware consumerism,....In both its right-wing and left-wing versions, the neoliberal project cannot easily reconcile the freedom of sovereign consumers with the duties of responsible citizens.' (Alan Aldridge, *Consumption* 92, 2003).

While consumers are mostly concerned with immediate delivery of goods and service, the citizens should be more aware of the underlying long-term problems facing the society.

A third problem of consumerism as identified by Aldridge has to do with the social exclusion of the flawed consumer:

'Poverty means being prevented from participating in....a normal and happy life. In a consumer society, the normal life is the life of the consumer and the happy life is one that delights in consumption. Poor people in a consumer society are those who are defined ....as defective consumers.' (Alan Aldridge, *Consumption* 101, 2003).

The consequence of this is the widening gulf between those with the resource to consume and those who lack such resources.

Tim Edwards, another scholar who wrote on consumption and discussed the changes in the contemporary nature of shopping and consumerism, also thought that some of those changes were problematic. On supermarkets, he saw these problems:

'First, it facilitated the creation of impulse consumption, where the customer could pick up items at whim....; second, it placed far greater emphasis on the relationship of the product and the customer, and tended to cut out the importance of the shopkeeper.....; third, it ....facilitated greater spending.....' (Tim Edwards, *Contradictions of Consumption*, p. 113, 2000)

On shopping malls:

‘...mall culture is essentially mid-to upmarket culture premised on affluent populations with plenty to spend; while the socially undesirable...are sometimes excluded through increasingly sophisticated security and surveillance techniques.....’ (Tim Edwards, *Contradictions of Consumption*, p. 115, 2000)

Like Aldridge, he was also concerned about the increasing exclusion of the poor from the consumer society:

‘Although no such measures exist, one suspects strongly that one of the contemporary causes of psychological illness... concerns the pressures of living without the means to consume.’ (Tim Edwards, *Contradictions of Consumption*, p. 124, 2000)

### **Consumer Reigns Supreme ?**

Fiske’s concept of semiotic democracy is certainly tempting since, assuming that it is true, we as consumers need have no worries that we might find ourselves to be dupes being manipulated by consumerism. Rather, we can find confidence with the semiotic power which we possess to turn consumerism to our own advantage, and to transform the use of commodities by giving them our own meanings and values. We don’t have to accept what industrialists had tried to dictate on us. In doing so, we are participating in the process of shaping popular culture and social progress, and can take pride in it. It is little wonder that consumers feel a sense of supremacy. Catch phrases like ‘consumer protection’ and ‘the customer is always right’, and the idea that consumption will help the world out of the current economic crisis further give support to this exhilarating sense of supremacy.

Unfortunately, even if Fiske’s views were true back in 1980’s, it is no longer valid today. With the advancement of marketing theories and technology, the industrialists of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are able to manipulate consumers in sophisticated ways to which consumers can hardly apply semiotic resistance. Television campaigns, in particular, can even broadcast subliminal messages to persuade consumers. Some industries use personal selling to exploit personal relationships of the sales force. Even if some consumers are still able to exercise semiotic democracy and semiotic power, certainly not everyone is in the position to do so, as Aldridge and Edwards have discussed about the poor and oppressed and the problem of their social exclusion.

### **The Consumption Bubble**

While consumption, represented as a desirable way of life, does drive hard work and economic growth on the positive side, it also fuels the greediness that is human nature in most. One motive that caused unemployed youths like those described by John Fiske to practise their ‘guerrilla warfare’ and semiotic power in the shopping mall was likely a sense of jealousy and admiration of the blatant consumption that they saw. As soon as these youths have the means to consume, they would likely prefer the ‘real’ power of conspicuous consumption rather than a semiotic power. This is borne out by the issue we see of young people over-using their credit cards, eventually causing personal and family problems. While

we cannot condone their unaffordable extravagance, we might be sympathetic with their psychological need to break out of the social exclusion which both Aldridge and Edwards commented on with regard to the impoverished consumer. Aldridge's point on the relation between consumer and citizen is also relevant. In the consumer society in which the desire for immediate gratification is constantly encouraged and facilitated, the 'responsible citizen' with fore-sight and vision for the future good of the society becomes a lost case. The supremacy of the consumer and consumerism, accepted as ideals, give rise to the desire to attain more and more financial means to support increasing consumption. Without the Citizen's sense of social responsibilities to restrain such desires, the result is blatant greediness, causing ruthless and in many cases illegal actions. This is what we currently see unfolding in the world today.

For those honest consumers who simply want a 'better' life - which in a consumer society means more consumption power - for their families and are ready to work hard work for it, they are misguided by the notion that they can consume today and pay later, and that the means of paying will come even if they do not have it in sight. That was how the housing market bubble got built up in the US and Europe. The credit providers are not philanthropists. They are acting on their own greediness to make short term gains, disregarding the harm that would result in the longer term. The success that they had with the housing bubble led to consumption bubbles in other industries, drawing more consumers into the vicious cycle. Unfortunately, now that all the bubbles have burst, it is not just the consumers in the developed world who suffer. The poor and oppressed are the worst victims as, with them, it is not luxury consumption that is being threatened in an economic depression, but day to day subsistence.

It's ironic that the whole world is now encouraging more consumption as a means to cure the financial turmoil when in fact it is part of the cause of the problem. To continue to encourage consumption as a desirable way of life could be the start of another vicious cycle. Some optimists believe in the role of the government to regulate and see to it that similar problems do not recur in future. Yet governments are made up of people who are themselves consumers and they too can be tempted by the power of conspicuous consumptions. Given that they are in a position to exploit their political power for financial gains, the extent of greediness and ruthlessness that they can go to will be far worse in comparison to others in the society. The story of ex-president Chen's family in Taiwan has illustrated this point more than adequately.

The ultimate solution for sustainable financial well-being (physical well being too but that is another topic) in the world will lie in the acceptance of a leaner way of living and a curtailment of conspicuous consumption. Instead of being supply-driven in our consumption, there is a need to revert to the demand-driven mode. Given the tightened financial means in the affluent world, this switch will be forced upon most people anyway. In line with this, the society and industries will then refocus from consumption to production, producing what is required by consumers, not what they want to supply to consumers. In the long run, this is a more balanced and sustainable course of development for the world.

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