

## Criminology and Consumerism

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### INTRODUCTION

For too long criminologists have either ignored consumerism or misunderstood the role it plays in the constitution and reproduction of our current way of life. Few in criminology have acknowledged that consumerism is now integral to our global political economy, and even fewer have offered critical accounts of the vital functional and ideological roles consumerism has played throughout the history of capitalism. There is, of course, a valuable literature that covers most aspects of consumerism and consumer culture, but the illuminating concepts and analyses associated with this literature have yet to be integrated into our discipline. Here we argue that criminologists must now make a concerted attempt to push critical accounts of consumerism towards the centre of our discipline.

### CONSUMERISM

For those readers in the liberal democracies of Europe and North America, it should be perfectly clear why some sociologists have for decades talked about the rise of ‘consumer culture’ and the development of our present ‘consumer society’ (see for example Baudrillard, 1998; Bauman, 2007; see also Smart, 2010 for an overview). Consumerism is everywhere. It permeates the global north, especially in those nations that have fully embraced the principles of neoliberalism. It has forced change upon many modern institutions (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2001) and transformed our cultures and our expectations of collective life (Baudrillard, 1998; Bauman, 2003, 2007). Perhaps more importantly, consumerism has

infiltrated our dreams (Hall et al, 2008). It shapes our desires, our fantasies and our aspirations. As it has overpowered all alternative sources of meaning and value, it has furnished us with the symbols we use to gauge our own value and social significance (Winlow and Hall, 2006; 2009). It mediates human relationships and informs the ways we perceive and interact with others (Baudrillard, 1998; see also Miles et al., 1998). It orders new hierarchies and new mechanisms of exclusion (see, for example, Hayward and Yar, 2006; Miles, 2014), and it reproduces and intensifies the competitive individualism that is such a socially disruptive yet economically dynamic feature of postmodern liberal societies (Winlow and Hall, 2012; 2013). Its symbols of ‘conspicuous consumption’ (Veblen, 2009) are used to display status and foment the envy of others (Hall et al, 2008), yet, paradoxically, they can also be used to communicate belonging and a desire for integration and acceptance (Winlow and Hall, 2009a; Miles et al., 1998). Consumerism’s semiotic system is complex and changing. If our discipline is to construct new and enlightened models of socially contextualised motivation that are in keeping with the times, criminologists must try to understand consumerism’s impact on our individual drives, desires and social motivations – why and how we act and interact as social beings.

Understanding the development of contemporary consumerism should encourage us to think again about our history and the forces that have transformed our economies, our cultures, and our shared social life. We must also understand that these comprehensive changes to everyday social experience play a role in the gradual transformation of human subjectivity (Hall, 2012a; 2012b). This is not simply a matter of identifying the epidemic effects of consumer culture, such as mental ill-health, depression and anxiety (Sloan, 1996), and their various knock-on effects, which include obesity, body dysmorphia, anorexia, bulimia, self-harm, suicide, and so on (ibid; Schrecker and Bambra, 2015). Whilst of course avoiding crude mechanistic determinism, we must look beneath these outcomes to the underlying processual context,

particularly the dominance of instrumentalism, cynicism and narcissistic competition in our cultural lives. We should connect these processes to politics and economics, but we should also be brave enough to contemplate the suggestion that, after thirty years of socially destructive neoliberalism, a period in which we have been told repeatedly to value individual freedom and wealth above all things, our most basic dispositions and orientation to the world have changed (Hall, 2012a). To understand the role of consumerism in these changes we need to return to a critique of ideology. It is simply inadequate to keep repeating interpretivism's domain assumption – born in the past to attack crude positivist causality – which tells us that we interpret and negotiate meaning before we settle on various interpretations and act in the world. Consumer culture is constantly active in those complex webs of meaning and interpretation and the broader macro-processes of mass mediation – infiltrating, persuading, humiliating, affirming, eroding, reconstructing. We need to *rethink* consumerism from a criminological perspective, identify precisely its relationship to politics, economics, society and culture, and locate it firmly in a conjuncture in which the certainties of modernity are rapidly receding into the past. One vital aspect of this rethinking involves identifying and discarding obsolete ideas and theoretical frameworks from criminology's past (see Hall and Winlow, 2015) which clutter the field and prevent inquisitive researchers from coming to terms with the reality of contemporary consumerism.

Our starting point, however, should be to recognise that the democratisation of conspicuous consumption in the west has played a dynamic role in the reproduction of the capitalist system, with all of its stark inequalities and injustices (Hall et al, 2008). Consumerism feeds on such inequalities as it offers what now seems like the sole potential means of compensation and escape. However, the escape it offers is a centripetal *escape inwards* that keeps us invested in neoliberalism's political and economic project (ibid.). It encourages us to forget what we have

lost and imagine instead a ceaseless procession of technological innovation and novel indulgences that will lead us into a bright future, improve our lives and deliver to us enduring happiness. But, as it places individuals in competition with one another for symbols of social status, consumerism has eroded modern forms of civil society (see Baudrillard, 2007; Stiegler, 2009), and it has played a significant role in the dissipation of modernity's collectivist and universalist political projects (Badiou, 2007). As the future looks bright up above, it also looks more unstable and fragile down below.

### *Consumerism and desire*

The pleasures of active consumerism are not all that they seem. As some scholars have noted (see, for example, Bauman, 2007), the pleasures of consumerism tend to be quite fleeting. Consumerism is not simply about now and then buying a few material goods that we want but do not need. It also involves the ritualised act of discarding consumer items that have lost their allure, only to begin the process all over again as new products come on to the market (see Appadurai, 2011). Consumerism holds out the prospect of satisfaction through ownership, but, quickly, we find ourselves assailed by new desires. New trinkets are placed before us, and the 'social' dialogue that accompanies them inspires us to return yet again to the market in the hope that these trinkets will assuage the anxieties that gnaw away at us from within. But somehow consumerism never quite manages to deliver. Dissatisfaction becomes permanent and active.

As Baudrillard (1998) notes, consumerism encourages us to believe that we are affluent, content and happy despite there being no rational foundation for such a belief. In fact, as we in the west move further and further away from the old world of industrial modernity – with its restrictive institutions and its powerful collective systems of belief – contentment and

happiness appear to be diminishing. The liberalisation of our culture and economy has not produced new freedoms, and it has certainly not created a new world of contentment. Anxiety and insecurity abound, and these negative emotions are not restricted to the poor. They exist throughout the social structure (James, 2010).

Rarely these days do we reach a point at which we move away from the consumer sphere in the belief that it has lost its appeal and no longer has anything to offer us. The market's ideological support systems serve its fundamental growth-fetish by working tirelessly to incorporate older populations into the sphere of consumerism (Barber, 2007), just as they do with younger populations (Postman, 1996; see also Hayward, 2012; Smith, 2013). We now learn to consume at a very young age. We are bombarded with advertising messages and quickly become attuned to the power of brands, at home, in the street and even in institutions of early education (Beder, 2009). Advertisers now target children (Bakan, 2005; Barber, 2007) with incisive marketing campaigns that encourage anxiety and symbolic competition as a form of surrogate socialisation (see Hall et al., 2008). Consumerism does not relinquish its grip when the individual reaches retirement age. Everyone must consume, and everything that can be commodified – including health, education and all other needs once ministered in the public realm – must be commodified. All that is holy must continue to be profaned, even when it becomes difficult to remember what might have been holy in the first place.

Consumption is not simply the epiphenomenon of production. Consumer desires demand advancements in production, which in turn convince us that increased consumption is possible, justifying and unleashing further desires. If we were ever to reach a point at which we were no longer desirous of consumerism's products and services, capitalism would plunge into crisis. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, George Bush Jr. encouraged Americans to go shopping in order

to get the economy moving again. ‘Head down to Disneyworld in Florida’, he said, bequeathing us one of his trademark quirky metaphors. Consume and enjoy your freedoms, he affirmed, and in so doing display to our cultural and geopolitical enemies our deep commitment to the American way of life. Americans didn’t get where they are today by not consuming. As consumerism is ideologically and practically normalised in such no-nonsense terms each individual is encouraged to understand herself in relation to its variegated sign-value system. As markets approach their limits they must be rejuvenated. New products need to be identified, and old products need to be recycled so that they can be resold to younger buyers who have yet to encounter their symbolic value. Capitalism is a self-revolutionising economic system. It changes only so that it may continue.

However, advanced knowledge of capitalism’s systemic logic, no matter how detailed and sophisticated, does not tell us why consumers continue to consume beyond need. How is consumer desire constituted? This is the point where the damage caused by the relative marginalisation of psychoanalysis across the social sciences in favour of less sophisticated frameworks such as symbolic interactionism and post-structuralism – which celebrate autonomous resilience, creativity and resistance even when they are in their historically most beleaguered and parlous condition – comes into stark relief. Lacanian psychoanalysts have long known that desire signifies a lack (Lacan, 2007), an absence, and as such is contingent, fragile and ephemeral. As soon as we take ownership of the longed-for thing we are destined to lose our desire for it. Desire, therefore, is dependent upon the absence of the desired object. Consumer markets are reliant upon this basic principle. Taking ownership of a car, a house or a gadget we have longed for does not satisfy us, because desire is immediately reconstituted. We immediately begin to focus on another thing, or another experience, and desire begins again. Satisfaction, properly understood, threatens consumerism.

Furthermore, our desires are never fully our own. It is wrong to assume that they are simply a product of our imagination. Our desires are socially mediated. We desire what the other desires. Would we desire a Chanel handbag if others do not? Would we desire such an item in the absence of marketing campaigns, media coverage and the general cultural acceptance of branded 'style'? The advertising industry's general understanding of these processes has enabled it to reformulate desire and thus expand consumer markets in increasingly sophisticated ways by identifying, creating or exacerbating social anxieties, and stimulating the deep sense of lack that lies at the core of the human subject (Hall et al., 2008). Even today's social movements, conceptually provisioned by social science's conservative and liberal theoretical frameworks, promote themselves by feeding on the desire for what the neoliberal market has made absent – community, authority, security, autonomy, politics, resistance, and so on. Once we have been made anxious about our social standing by having doubts cast on our imagined personal attributes it becomes that much easier to sell us a commodity that promises to mollify our anxieties and boost our esteem.

The process of stimulation and mollification, unlike its effect on the individual psycho-emotional constitution and social environment, is quite pragmatic and banal. Any material item made available for sale is accompanied to market by a range of symbolic lures. Increasingly, it is this symbolism that provokes desire and encourages the consumer to part with his money. As we hinted earlier, we should not make the mistake of assuming that consumerism and consumption are the same thing. Consumption, when it occurs within reasonable limits, is of course a basic need. Consumerism is quite different. Consumerism exceeds the functional materiality of the object. For example, it seems that many of us in the affluent west no longer simply buy a coat in order to keep warm during winter. There are other considerations. We

choose a coat from a store that, in all likelihood, contains a great many coats. Our choice may be influenced by what appear as practical matters. We may go for the cheapest coat, or a coat that has been significantly reduced in price. We may also choose a coat because of its designer label, or we may simply like the style of the coat we have chosen above those others on offer. We may choose a coat because it is similar to coats worn by friends. We may disregard a coat for that very same reason. We may buy the coat because we have seen a celebrity wear a similar coat, or because that style of the coat is, at present, considered fashionable. None of these matters are clear cut. However, to imagine that we each possess a specific sense of taste entirely of our own creation is to accept uncritically the doctrine of the fully autonomous sovereign individual.

Consumerism, as Baudrillard (1998; see also Stiegler, 2009) noted, has replaced traditional systems of individuation to become a mode of rootless, free-floating competitive differentiation. Its purpose is not the satisfaction of needs or desires. In a western culture dominated by advertising, we are compelled to discard collective identities and pursue individuality, but all we have to construct a sense of uniqueness are the symbols presented to us by consumerism's panoramic sign-value system. Our 'individuality' is always anxious, incomplete, and, ultimately, a myth that reflects of our growing distance from reality and our complete submersion in a commodified hyper-reality that has displaced all collective forms and mutual interests. We have stepped outside of history. Adorno and Horkheimer (1997) were similarly unimpressed by the promises of consumer individualism. Like Baudrillard, they presented such individualism as a functional myth, constructed and constantly reaffirmed by various facets of late capitalism's ideological machine. For them, the pursuit of individuality led only to an unfulfilling pseudo-individuality that rested upon the disavowal of the uniformity that structured consumer practice. The diner can choose from the menu, but our choice is



limited to the options placed before us. Choice, where it existed at all, was restricted, and subject to highly advanced processes of manipulation (Ewen, 1998). We should not underestimate the skill and incisiveness of the advertising industry or its ability to create within us a desire for consumerism's objects (Lears, 1995; Ewen, 2001), and we should not simply ignore consumerism's social dimension, and the various pressures imposed upon us to emotionally attach ourselves to consumerism's object-symbols.

The way we are constantly persuaded to buy and display object-symbols is complex and paradoxical. Contradictory pressure is exerted simultaneously on all of us to both fit in with social groups and set ourselves apart from them (Miles et al, 1998; Winlow and Hall, 2009a), which energises a dynamic matrix fuelled by the constant adoption and dismissal of identities. It is comforting to imagine ourselves as autonomous, discerning consumers able to see the dominant ideology for what it is, and position ourselves in opposition to it. However, as we dress to reflect our unique choice of style, we also hope to triumph over others carrying out the same task. As we donate our energy and our money to consumer capitalism we simultaneously and constantly disrupt the social collective in favour of an unstable milieu of competitive individualism.

Of course, in most cases we buy our clothes from global corporations that have branches throughout the world. Quite often, these stores stock almost exactly the same items. We shop in Gap, Primark or Top Shop stores that are replicated across the country and other parts of the world, yet we still manage to retain the conceit that we are creative consumers shopping in ways that reflect our unique tastes. The conceit of the sovereign individual blinds us to the homogeneity beneath the surface of consumer culture, and draws our attention away from the process of capital accumulation with its myriad social, environmental and geopolitical

problems. However, if we redirect our attention away from this spectacular procession of object-symbols and towards our experience of culture, we can begin to glimpse the underlying structures and processes in which our tastes are formed.

*Consume now!*

How can we contextualise consumerism's cultural triumph in both popular and intellectual life? Our narrative must begin in post-war Europe. The eventual cessation of hostilities after six long years of war produced across much of the continent a common desire to avoid further social and political upheaval. The establishment of social democratic governance across much of Europe fomented a sense of hope among the working class that the obscene hierarchies of the pre-war period were gone for good (Hennessy, 2007; Judt, 2010). The Keynesian economic model was adopted by politicians in France, West Germany, Britain, Scandinavia and the Benelux countries. Sizable welfare states were constructed, and most mainstream politicians were committed to the principle of full employment (Judt, 2010). The capitalist class largely accepted the new state of affairs. Full employment, rising wages and comprehensive welfare systems ensured a degree of political and social stability, which counteracted the threat of leftist militancy and rebellion. Capitalism paid a significant price to ensure its survival (see Minsky, 2008). Taxes on wealth and income rose, and returns on investments fell.

In time, productivity began to rise, which prompted labour unions to become more strident in their demands. The lifestyles of the working class improved significantly. Most working-class families were not rich by any stretch of the imagination, but, in comparison to the realities of life for working-class families before the war, their lot had improved. The British working class had overcome many of the huge material pressures and insecurities they had faced from the beginning of the capitalist project. Education and healthcare were now free at the point of

provision. Work was, for the most part, quite plentiful, and wage levels ensured that, once immediate costs had been met, a little disposable income remained that could be used for leisure pursuits and creature comforts (see Hennessey, 2007; Judt, 2010). This is not the 'origin' of consumerism, but it is the era in which consumerism permeated western societies to become a mass phenomenon.

The growth of consumer culture during the post-war period is indicative of a number of fundamental changes in political economy, but before we address these changes we must first of all explain in a little more detail the importance of capitalism's growth fetish. Capital is not simply money. It is money in search of investment. Capital must remain in constant motion, moving from investment to investment, securing profit and growing as it does so. If capital stands still or withdraws from the fray, it returns to its initial form and becomes once again mere money, and in most cases mere money tends to depreciate in value. Without profit-seeking investment the entire capitalist system is threatened. Capitalists must believe that investment in pursuit of profit is a risk worth taking. Without this investment factories lie still and financial markets crash.

During the relatively golden years of post-war social democracy, capitalists tended to accept a lower rate of return on their investments than they do today. Now the expectations of capitalist investors have grown. In a globalising economy the nation-state's ability to mediate the relationship between labour and capital has been diminished, and capital has, to all intents and purposes, withdrawn from the negotiating table. These days capitalists, unbound from their nation states of origin, are unwilling to accept reduced profits in return for social and political order and neoliberal states have neither the desire nor the ability to impose their will on highly mobile capital.

However, in countries such as Britain during the post-war years there existed a political consensus that capital must be controlled and used to benefit the population. Capitalism's innate drive to secure maximum profit was attenuated by the politics of opposition and a robust state willing to intervene in the economy to maintain demand and truncate excessive inequality. Living standards for many improved significantly, inequality decreased, crime declined to record lows, and new markets keen to take advantage of the surplus income of the masses began to develop. The first wave of the consumer boom promised to make the lives of consumers easier. Washing machines, vacuum cleaners and gas cookers sold well. They possessed an obvious use-value. Consumers bought these items because they possessed an appealing and demonstrable function. Washing machines, and later spin dryers, made the task of dealing with the family's laundry that much easier. Vacuum cleaners were remarkably easy to use and a huge advance upon what had gone before. The initial love affair was with technology.

As markets grew rapidly early forms of consumer competition began to establish themselves in popular culture – in neighbourhoods and in family and friendship networks. Consumer market sectors relying exclusively on technological innovation quickly reach a saturation point. In time, everyone open to the idea of buying a vacuum cleaner already had one. At that point a change occurs in the mode of innovation. Technological innovation can no longer be relied upon as a constant, so each manufacturer then turns to the advertising industry in the hope of encouraging customers to choose their products over others. However, when a market such as this is quite advanced, manufacturers are forced to fight for business among a diminishing pool of potential customers. In a saturated market demanding more reliability and durability manufacturers can no longer wait to sell to those seeking to replace defective products. At this point the market must convince those who already own vacuum cleaners to decide that the

vacuum cleaner they own is no longer good enough. Either its technology is outdated, and better machines are now available, or the *symbolic value* of the machine has depreciated, to the extent that one must purchase again to regain or improve one's social status in relation to others. By utilising sign-value and elevating its significance in the minds of consumers, the market was able to overcome the limitations of materiality. In time, the actual function of an electric kettle became, for many consumers, less important in purchasing decisions than the sign-value attached to the kettle itself. Even relatively uninteresting household items are signified and become part of the constellation of consumer culture. Consumerism is not just about fashionable markets in clothes and music; it infiltrates every aspect of common culture.

The gradual diminishment of use-value and the massive growth in the importance of sign-value enabled the market to keep expanding. Baudrillard (1998) was particularly taken with the unending stream of gadgets that began to flood the market from the sixties onwards. His analysis occasionally overshot the runway – for instance, two-speed windscreen wipers are actually useful in variable weather conditions – but his general point that many products were bought primarily to titillate and distract hit the mark. The consumer became increasingly convinced that he had left behind the discomforts of reality to occupy a sphere of affluence, happiness and perpetual novelty. To the consumer, the commodification and increasingly formulaic character of cultural artefacts and the concomitant loss of cultural autonomy and authenticity (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997), a process that continues today, became relatively less important than the entry into a realm of material comfort and imaginary social status.

This new Imaginary provoked cultural change in working-class communities (Hoggart, 1969). Many working-class lives were now liberated from the back-breaking toil and perennial economic insecurity that had beset previous generations. Working hours fell and incomes rose.

Working conditions improved. Leisure time expanded, as did the range of commercialised cultural activities available for workers and their families. Amidst this cultural sea-change of displacement and renewal consumer items became progressively more important in processes of identity-building. Consumerism's symbolism worked its way into what had hitherto been organic aspects of culture – family, class, community, nation, religion. Slowly, the importance of these signs grew and more traditional aspects of common culture receded into history.

But how has consumerism achieved this position of cultural dominance during a neoliberal period in which livelihoods have become more precarious and the incomes of most of the population have either remained static or fallen? It is embedded within our cultures so completely that we often fail to notice its influence. Of course its means of dissemination are now technologically advanced and its seductive techniques have been developed to a fine art. Western nations are flooded with cheap goods manufactured abroad. But this does not obviate the basic financial fact that, strictly speaking, the majority of individuals still cannot afford the goods that would temporarily assuage their symbolically charged desires. So how have these individuals managed to maintain their commitment to consumerism?

The answer is quite straightforward. Debt. A vast ocean of debt, renamed 'credit' to avoid the traditional shameful connotations. Psychologically, the embrace of debt has been justified by a reworking of the Super-Ego. Whereas the traditional Super-Ego's harsh judgements made us feel guilty for desiring too much, the new 'Super-Ego injunction to enjoy' (Zizek, 2009) makes us feel guilty if we miss a single opportunity to indulge ourselves. "Reward yourself" it says, "you've earned it". In this encouraging cultural climate consumer and household debts have grown enormously during the neoliberal epoch even as incomes have fallen in real terms, and as job insecurity has established itself as a norm throughout the post-industrial west (Horsley,

2015). As wages stagnated while productivity and profits continued to grow, a huge amount of capital was generated, which must find profitable investment opportunities. Rather than paying western workers more, capital has paid them less, invested in manufacturing centres abroad where profits were even higher and compelled these workers to take on debts and pay interest in order to sustain the illusion that they have a recognised place in mainstream society. In basic financial terms, capital has claimed larger profits by suppressing wages. It has then loaned the surplus capital back to workers as money so they can continue to purchase the consumer items that are judged to be of such crucial cultural importance (see Wolff, 2013). Thus a new investment mechanism has been created, yet another source of huge profits that accrue from developing markets in consumer debt (Horsley, 2015). These debts can be packaged, insured and traded in derivatives markets, creating yet another source of profits. In the neoliberal era the entirety of the global economy is structured in relation to debt.

We are now encouraged to take on debts while young. Then we must spend much of our lives attempting to pay them off. We are encouraged to look forward to an old age free from debt, which distracts us from a reality in which a growing proportion of the western population structure their existence in relation to their debt obligations. Consumer debt, it seems, plays a significant role in subjugating and depoliticising western populations, and encouraging them to abandon all hope of systemic change (Lazzarato, 2015). Debt – especially mortgage debt – bonds us to the current economic system and ensures that we submit to the established means of servicing debt. We work to pay down our debt, and we increasingly see the removal of consumer debt as a significant life goal (ibid). We often spend our lives in jobs we hate in order to pay back what we owe (Horsley, 2015). We are encouraged to buy now, on credit, and then spend years paying back this money. For many, the psychological burden of debt is enormous: as the allure of luxury consumption quickly fades, only the debt remains.

However, this descent into the vortex of consumer debt could not have occurred without underlying changes in political economy. In the 1970s Britain's industrial economy ran into trouble. The reasons for this are complex, but we should note in particular the growth of global competition, the rise in oil prices and the insistent demands of organised labour for better wages and conditions. Capital had, since the close of the war in 1945, accepted a lower rate of return on investments. They had traded off higher profits for the relative social stability provided by the post-war social democratic consensus. However, as profits fell further during the 1970s while labour unions remained belligerent and taxes remained high, capital rebelled against the established consensus and agitated for new economic freedoms. These gradual, behind-the-scenes changes resulted in the transformation of the Conservative party and the rise of Margaret Thatcher, a singularly divisive figure willing to take on the hard work of forging a new politics based upon entrepreneurialism, competition and individual reward (see Sandbrook, 2013; Bloom, 2015). She actively sought to break the power of the unions (Milne, 2014), and in this task she achieved a staggering degree of success. She began to deconstruct the protective barriers that restricted profitability. She embraced the rhetoric of the free market, and allowed cheap foreign products to flood into Britain. Almost immediately, Britain's industrial economy was thrown into crisis. Unemployment rose to historic heights (Milne, 2014). Thatcher did little to protect Britain's industrial base because, to her, mass unemployment, poverty and social distress were 'a price worth paying' in order to liberate capital from the shackles placed upon it by the social democratic state (see Vinen, 2010). In order to boost economic growth and shrink the size of the British state she privatised many of the country's most prized assets and looked to the city of London to boost the countries flagging Gross Domestic Product.



Her politics were revolutionary in many respects. Many believed her tenure in office would be an aberration, and that the post-war consensus would reassert itself upon her departure. Instead, she established a new consensus that encouraged all the politicians that followed her to commit to tax cuts and market liberalisation as a means of generating growth. Britain was abruptly thrown into a post-industrial economy dominated by an expansive and diverse service sector. Blair attempted to compete for hi-tech manufacturing jobs, but by this time the British economy was at a marked disadvantage in comparison to countries such as Germany and Japan, whose manufacturing infrastructure had been refurbished and modernised by US investment after the war. However, a liberated financial sector busied itself creating new investment opportunities for a global capital, and a downgraded and highly unstable service sector mopped up the rest. Britain had moved from being a producer nation, defined by its entrenched class system and its extractive and manufacturing industries, to a consumer nation, defined by rising inequality, reduced welfare provision and precarious labour markets (Winlow and Hall, 2006). The new jobs produced by the service sector were no compensation for the loss of stable and reasonably well paid industrial jobs. Britain had gone from being the ‘workshop of the world’ (Samuel, 1977) to an insubstantial retail park, a journey from the corporeal reality of manufacturing to the theme-park hyper-reality of consumerism (see Winlow and Hall, 2013).

Neoliberalism worked up an unstoppable head of steam. The 1990s are often represented as the decade in which neoliberalism solidified its reputation for growth and prosperity, but the economic reality of those times is more complicated (Stiglitz, 2004). It is true that the city of London boomed during those years, but the industrial economy in Britain withered still further. Inequality continued to rise and labour markets became yet more unstable. The growth of the city and the increased profitability of the financial sector encouraged the new investment class to become more confident and assertive in its representations to government. The rest of the

country was, apparently, being pulled along on their coattails, an encumbrance creating too much drag on the sleek new machine. This new elite pushed for reductions in regulation and tax breaks, and, because the financial sector was vital to the national economy, the politicians of the main political parties were receptive. Politics, by this stage, had lost much of its traditional substance. The key characteristics of neoliberal ideology, economics and governance were accepted as a *fait accompli* (see Winlow and Hall, 2013).

The industrial nations of the old world were, with only one or two exceptions, now consumer nations that imported goods from the developing world. The developing world was developing rapidly because it was producing most of the basic volume goods for western markets. The United States of America underwent similar changes to Britain. At the end of the war it was by far the world's most productive nation. Such economic strength allowed it to offer the old-world European nations loans to rebuild after the war. This was not an act of largesse. It was clear that the United States would benefit economically as Europe redeveloped. Of course, as the USA was the global industrial superpower, a significant amount of the money advanced to the European states would flow back to the USA as these nations and their corporate sectors purchased American goods and services. The factories of the USA would be kept busy as European economies improved and as demand increased. However, as the century progressed the USA stepped down from its role as an industrial superpower. Deindustrialisation during the 1980s and 1990s was as disruptive there as it was in Britain, if not more so (see Currie, 2008). Although the economy retained proportionately more manufacturing than the UK, key American politicians had no desire for the USA to compete head-on with a new generation of productive economies. Instead they transformed the country's economy into a gigantic financial vacuum cleaner for global investment capital.

Germany and Japan remained hugely productive economies, and, as time passed, they were joined by China, India and one or two others. The economies of these countries produced significant surpluses. China, for example, tends to produce the consumer items that Americans buy, but it must reinvest its surplus in ways that sustain its markets – to enable those who buy its products to continue to buy its products. So, to generalise, China reinvests its surplus in western consumer economies. This inward investment, circulated through the credit system, supplies the west’s army of consumers with the money they need to keep buying products manufactured in China and the other industrialising, surplus-generating nations. Money from the globe’s key surplus economies flows into Wall Street to the tune of around \$5 billion per day (Varoufakis, 2011), and, generally speaking, this money tends to flow back to these surplus economies as Americans purchase their products.

We now live in an era of low interest rates (Picketty, 2014). Western governments must keep interest rates low in order to lubricate consumer markets. The availability of cheap debt has played a crucial role in the development of the neoliberal project. As we have already noted, wages stagnated as profits rose. However, the availability of cheap debt to chase cheap consumer goods created a perception of incremental progress that curtailed any suggestion of renewed political militancy. Cheap debt enabled workers to continue with consumer lifestyles even though their incomes had not improved a great deal. In Britain and the United States the growth of home ownership bound the individual to the neoliberal economic project in a way that merely renting a home does not. It militates against political radicalism, and it tends to create the impression that one’s lot in life is improving. Such an iconic asset as a house occasions us to imagine that we are richer than we are while the low-interest mortgage fades unnoticed into the background.

## CRIMINOLOGY AND CONSUMERISM

### *Misunderstanding and misrepresenting consumerism*

Consumerism, we should note, is now so ubiquitous that it can often escape the attention of critical social analysts. In criminology, many of those who have addressed consumerism do so only in the most basic way. For example, some criminologists have used the term 'consumerism' to communicate only the basic need for goods (see Newburn et al, 2015). Some who place themselves on the criminological left have mistaken theoretical critiques of consumerism for some sort of condescension felt towards those who consume (see Cooper, 2012). Others approach it uncritically as the great gift capitalism has bestowed upon its populations (see Matthews, 2014), or even identify it as the new wellspring of political resistance (Hall, 1981). These positions overlook the key issues at stake and systematically ignore consumerism's most troubling characteristics.

While the material and environmental aspects of consumer culture should be of great interest to criminologists, especially those involved in the rapidly developing sphere of green criminology, deeper psychosocial accounts of consumer culture require analyses of ideology and symbolism (Baudrillard, 1998; Frank, 1998; Hall et al., 2008). However, for over four decades many on the political left in Britain have embraced consumerism and focused on its supposedly liberating qualities. Many leftist social scientists (see, for example, Featherstone, 1995; Hall and Jefferson, 2006) have argued that consumerism equips us with a new range of signifiers that allow individuals to transcend an inherently repressive social order that sought to control the population and reproduce its diverse historical injustices. Consumer culture, they argued, allows the individual to take a far more active and creative role in the construction of self-identity. For these critics, the old order was breaking apart. The rebellious young consumer could no longer be pinned down by the traditional mechanisms of control and repression. The

consumer choices of these young people reflected their desire to break free from convention and forge a new path of their own creation. Above all, consumerism appeared to facilitate a 'rebellion into style', to bring choice and stylistic diversity to a dour and rather homogenous post-war cultural vista. It allowed younger generations to separate themselves from the restrictions of the parent culture and identify their own sources of value, which tended to be connected to fashion, music and other aspects of popular culture (see Hebdige, 1979; Hall and Jefferson, 2006). Consumer symbols could be reworked into new meanings on which forms of subcultural togetherness could be founded. Thus cultural in-groups could use consumerism and their own unique sense of style to set themselves apart as 'new communities', and to reaffirm their separateness by constructing their own norms and values, which were believed by some to resist modernity's expansive 'social control apparatus' (Cohen, 1979: 340).

#### *Consumerism and the 'cultural turn' in Criminology*

Of course, the intellectuals who constructed these perspectives were perfectly aware that consumer products were intimately connected to processes of capital accumulation, and that corporately manufactured goods carried with them a range of signifiers constructed in relation to profit maximisation. They were also cognisant of the fact that these signifiers bonded the individual to the reproduction of capitalism. However, these new leftists were convinced that all the while the consumer symbols that represented capital accumulation and systemic reproduction were being reworked and subverted by creative youth. For instance, most of the subcultural analysis that came out of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies focused on this process. Hall and Jefferson (2006) argued that the huge amount of importance placed on commodified clothes and music by youth subcultures did not indicate the triumph of modern capitalism. From the 1970s onwards cultural theory performed complex and at times rather obscurantist intellectual gymnastics to convince the reader that the members of various

subcultures had invented a collective symbolic method of subverting capitalism, even though the majority spent most of their disposable income on mass-produced consumer items and showed only passing interest in substantive alternative politics. The youthful consumer was positioned as a romantic hero, a modern day David who could not be controlled by the ponderous capitalist Goliath. This 'cultural turn' was in essence an intellectual and political wrong-turn that is only just recently beginning to be seen for what it is – a colossal mistake (Smith, 2014; Hall and Winlow, 2015; Horsley, 2015; Raymen and Smith, 2015). Wildly over-reacting to the failures of post-WWII state socialism and social democracy, the cultural turn founded itself negatively on the outright denial of the unavoidable fact that capitalism cannot be resisted at the point of consumption. Subsequently, it dismissed mass media and advertising's ability to develop niche markets and integrate ostensibly 'oppositional' cultural trends. As time passed the cultural turn showed its colours by openly revealing its fear of what might happen if fundamental changes were made to capitalism's economy and attendant ideological project.

The cultural turn made a high art out of the refusal to engage with reality. Its unwavering optimism still survives. Indeed, it continues to be canonised in the textbooks and remains very much in vogue among social scientific accounts of youth culture, music and fashion (see, for example, Beal, 1995; Martin, 2009; Haenfler, 2012). Those working in this tradition cannot or simply do not want to detect the fundamental lack that pervades contemporary consumer culture and captures so much of its subjects' energy. They tend to ignore the crass theme-park fakery of our shopping malls, the incessant privatisation of public space and the flood of advertising messages that debase our culture, foment hostile and envious social relations and solidify the position of money as the primary source of value. They cannot see consumerism's co-option of leisure (Raymen and Smith, 2015), the stupefying and infantilising populism of

most mainstream media, and the general dumbing down, fragmentation and depoliticisation of a once vibrant and threatening working-class culture. They ignore the rather obvious fact that many of the perceived benefits of ownership are calibrated against the inability of others to own. Instead, they see legions of young people dipping nimbly in and out consumerism's semiotic system, inverting corporate messages, and constructing their own norms and values that are inherently noble and opposed to all that is wrong with western consumer society. We might speculate that this basic narrative continues to exist at the forefront of youth sociology at least partly because it celebrates the underdog and positions young people as inherently rebellious and politically engaged. Constructing and canonising a celebratory account of young people battling against a repressive social order also obviates the need to engage with the more challenging and far less optimistic theoretical accounts of consumer culture offered by European neo-Marxists and post-Marxists in France and Germany (see especially Horkheimer and Adorno, 1997; Adorno, 2001; Baudrillard, 2007; Althusser, 2008; Stiegler, 2009).

The cultural turn was imported into many aspects of critical criminology, but it found its true expression in cultural criminology. Despite the evolution of this sub-discipline and the growing interest of a small number of cultural criminologists in consumerism, ideology and political economy (see for example Hayward and Yar, 2006; Hayward, 2012), we should note that in general cultural criminology has not yet escaped the cultural turn to confront it on its own terms (see Ferrell, 1996; Presdee, 2000). To generalise, cultural criminology tends to assume that the stereotypically marginalised and under-educated 'criminal' is engaged in a fight against capital, cultural homogeneity and a broad system of oppressive social control. The criminal fights against the governance system that refused to give him a chance and criminalised his values on behalf of capitalist reproduction. With his crimes the criminal kicks back symbolically and materially at a system that has been stamping on his class for generations.

This position romanticises the working-class deviant and imbues him with characteristics difficult to find in the prisons, police stations and problem estates of the neoliberal era. Does the marginalised criminal truly or even vaguely understand the abstract system of capitalism and its social order, and is he so disgusted by his experiences of this capitalist reality that he structures his identity and social activity in opposition to it, even at the risk of significant punishment? Alternative research and theorisation suggest not (Ayres and Treadwell, 2012; Smith, 2014; Horsley, 2014; Hall and Winlow, 2015). Do not most acquisitive criminals, both in prisons and out on the street, tell us that their primary conscious motivation for committing crime is to acquire cash? Do they not blame their ignominious or traumatic experiences on anything but capitalism, and do they not display a clear desire to live a life defined by consumer indulgence? Too often liberal social scientists busy themselves scanning the barren landscape of contemporary neo-capitalism in search of cultural formations that might be construed as ‘oppositional’ (see Hall and Winlow, 2007), and in so doing ignore the reality that’s right before their eyes.

The painful reality is that the vast majority of the population are not particularly radical, and nor are they ethically opposed to the continuation of liberal capitalism. They are not disgusted by the commodification of culture, they are not particularly angry at the growing vacuity of parliamentary-democratic politics, and they are not morally opposed to neoliberalism’s brutal reallocation of money upwards. The silent majority tend to accept the basic constituents of our present reality, and if they are angry or dissatisfied with anything, it tends to be their own failure to achieve success within the capitalism system, and not the grotesque excesses of the capitalist system itself. The same tends to be true of people involved in criminal markets (Winlow, 2001; Winlow and Hall, 2009b). Might it not be reasonable to suggest that most acquisitive



crimes and even some violent crimes (ibid; Hall and Wilson, 2014) are bound up with the logic of capitalism and the anxieties, drives and desires it inspires? Should we really continue with accounts of crime as resistance when reality indicates quite clearly that the desire to seek gratification in consumer capitalism's sign-value system is a well-established characteristic in most criminal cultures across the west? At the fundamental level of what we now call 'values', criminals are really very much like the rest of us. It is at the level of norms, or rather, the normative ways in which 'values' are enacted, that criminals tend to be a little different.

We must now accept that the legions of people who head out to the high street, the shopping mall or the retail park each weekend are not using their consumer practice to oppose the inequities of capitalism's social order. We must discard the comforts of romanticism and celebratory accounts of culture if our knowledge and understanding of contemporary culture is to progress. We must summon up the courage to appraise a truly disturbing reality. It is a reality in which we will see significant ecological change within our lifetime (Heinberg, 2011). We are already seeing the first signs of resource wars and mass migration caused by ecological change, the failure of nation-states and ongoing national and geopolitical conflict (Hiscock, 2012; Klare, 2012; Pearce, 2013). Democratic politics, it appears, has lost the capacity to regulate the market (see Winlow et al, 2015), and, in most western societies, the gap between rich and poor grows wider with every passing year (see Picketty, 2014). Why should we assume that young people are inherently rebellious and carry with them the will to transform the injustices of the world? A minority may be politically active and keen to affect real change, but a great many more care nothing for politics and are happily distracted by the shallow pleasures of consumer culture. Cynicism has grown to become one of the defining features of our post-crash cultural life. Some people may be angry at the injustices of the contemporary capitalism, but, for the moment at least, they can find no alternative to truly believe in. It is in this climate

of *substantive political absence* that many western sociologists and criminologists see consumer culture as a site of political potential (see Winlow et al., 2015).

### *The challenge to criminology*

We can see quite clearly the inadequacies of the cultural turn. But why should a renewed critique of consumerism in its politico-economic context be of interest to criminologists? Surely everyone is influenced by consumer culture, so theories based on a critique of consumer culture cannot explain why a minority commit crime. Of course this is the standard riposte that does have some critical potency when levelled against early criminological positions such as strain, differential association and subcultural theory. However, most criminological theories are hampered by various forms of naturalism, sometimes overt and other times disavowed (see Hall, 2012a) – the malady of infinite aspiration, affinity to the in-group's values, susceptibility to labelling, resistance to authority, and so on. Tied down by these various assumptions, criminological theory in general has ignored consumerism's incursion and disruption of the basic processes that configure the individual's construction of identity.

We have explored this in fine detail elsewhere (see, for example, Hall et al, 2008), but the basic premise is that consumer culture has encouraged the growth of problematic forms of narcissism that rest not simply on advancing the interests of the self, but advancing one's interests in relation to the downfall of others. Earlier we laid out in basic detail how the neoliberal mode of political economy has cast western populations into a condition of precariousness. This general condition fosters anxiety in each individual regarding their position in the social order. In its natural form anxiety is latent whilst its manifest form – fear – is objectively contingent; put simply, latent low-level anxiety can erupt into fear when a threatening object appears. However, there is nothing natural about anxiety's permanent incitement in the form of

*objectless anxiety*, where it cannot make the transition into fear because the real object of fear – the unstable and insecure capitalist system – is ideologically disavowed. There nothing timeless and natural about a social system that casts its members into a permanent condition of objectless anxiety about their membership (Hall, 2012a). Capitalism was the first system in history to systematically dissolve the social for the purpose of generating permanent objectless anxiety and harnessing the ensuing human energy to the economy (Winlow and Hall, 2013). Life in the developing capitalist project cast individuals into a sociosymbolic competition ordered by the symbolic values carried by consumer objects. After generations of living in such a precarious and competitive environment, the fleeting pleasures that accompany the ownership of designer items become valuable only in relation to the inability of others to own. The committed consumer utilises consumer symbolism to incite envy in others, and, of course, this performs a vital socioeconomic function. The great pleasure of owning a Mercedes-Benz motor car comes not in driving the car but in being seen to drive the car. Others must know that we have achieved this great feat of consumer success and elevated the self above the quotidian social world, thus inspiring envious others to do the same. Thus a majority of individuals enter the vortex of long hours at work, lifelong debt repayment and the endless consumption of symbolic objects, every day donating most of their energy to capitalism's grid.

Consumerism exacerbates and plays upon the constitutive lack that lies at the heart of the human subject. It has intruded into the internal life of the subject and creates a cultural climate of anxiety and competition. We become orientated toward hedonism and excess, and seek to separate ourselves from our communities by raising ourselves above them. Consumerism encourages the immediate gratification of desires and places us in a vortex of unfulfilling work, debt repayment and objectless anxiety. Unless the individual has the financial means to cope with the systematic refusal of roles and the subsequent downward mobility, the only escape is

upwards through the system. In such a perfect trap the temptation to discard traditional commitments to politics, civility and the common good is placed before all of us, no matter where we are located in the socioeconomic structure. Of course some relatively poor people commit minor acquisitive crimes to secure basic material goods, but even amongst the poor the lure of designer labels as the accepted means of avoiding humiliation is immensely powerful (Hall et al., 2008).

Initial research suggests that the crucial factor influencing those who make the decision to commit acquisitive or violent crime as a way out of the vortex is the degree of cynicism and nihilism that has been instilled in the individual by complex permutations of ideology, socialisation and humiliating personal experiences (Winlow and Hall, 2006; 2009; Ellis, 2015). Of course the crime-consumer connection is woefully under-researched. Theories of the crime-consumer nexus are ignored by right-wing criminologists, and either ignored or met with various degrees of suspicion and hostility by a sub-dominant liberal-left paradigm that seems to almost wilfully misunderstand the basic position. In a discipline still fixated on mechanistic positivism or dated social constructionism and social reaction theory it features very rarely in journals and remains as a brief aside in most criminology textbooks. Criminology's enduring reluctance to construct new and convincing socially embedded accounts of criminal motivation in advanced capitalist consumer economies tells us a lot about the discipline's underlying politics and values. We have discussed that in detail elsewhere (see Hall, 2012a; Hall and Winlow, 2015; Winlow and Hall, 2013; Winlow et al., 2015). It is heartening to note that recently a new ripple of interest has appeared, which might eventually grow into a new wave, but all that remains to be said here is that a vast and complex vista beckons the explorations of new generations of criminologists.

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