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Title : The myth of egalitarianism in the consumer society

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Abstract:

Happiness or the state of well-being, are somehow the most important ideological concepts of the modern society that we can call it following Baudrillard, the consumption society. In the middle of the twentieth century, the capitalist society tried to shift from production politics into consumption strategies. A fundamental fatal strategy, which is going to change the visage of western societies and from this time, the obsession of well being started to dominate individuals mind. In order to have an egalitarian consumption society, the capitalism tries to change the state of well-being, into an observable and quantitative form of conformity. Commodities should be accessible and available for the whole citizens of a society and in order to obtain and to live permanently in the state of well being and happiness, human needs must be satisfied completely. The illusion of well being, attached profoundly to the values of the consumption society, became the new propaganda of the modern welfare states. The welfare states, tries to eliminate discrimination in the field of consumerism in order to give equal chances to their citizens, satisfy their needs by giving a crucial importance to economic growth so they started to create, the massive industrial manufactures, in order to satisfy the maximum number of material human needs. But the point is, that the economic growth in it-self is a result of inequality and the consumption society, tries to hide the 'exchange value', by the 'use value', in order to maintain the myth of egalitarianism and makes it survive. In this paper, we are going to analyze the new modalities of social inequality and new social segregations related to consumerism, by using Baudrillard's theories about the consumer society.

Key words : Consumer society, state of wellbeing, social differentiation codes, segregation, pleasure,

Section A : Egalitarianism in the consumer society

The capitalist dominant discourse in the middle of the twentieth century, has been changed a lot in comparison to the nineteenth century and the period of the industrial revolution. The Idea of well-being and happiness, become much more important after the second war and the capitalism, started to modify its principal rules in order to make the state of well-being possible for individuals, of course by reducing it to its materialistic aspects. So in the post war society , the state of well-being, is in a close relationship with the idea of consumerism. The reforms in the distribution of incomes and also in the conditions of working class and the middle class, has changed the visage of capitalism. The poverty is not as evident as it was in the nineteenth century and a minimum of well-being, is available for the majority of people and consequently, the rate of inequality becomes lower and poverty is not really out of control as it was, for example in the England of the industrial revolution (Engels has been shocked by the degree of poverty in the England's industrial cities).

The politics of welfare state, shifting from production to consumption in the middle of the twentieth century, so the new question is : is it possible to make satisfaction of human needs available for the majority of people? Because an equal satisfaction of needs for everyone, proves on the other side the non –existence of inequality. As Tocqueville mentioned in his work about the place of democracy in the United States of America, the democratic individuality and the state of well-being, both of them are linked to the satisfaction of needs. The human beings with the emergence of democracy and secular ways of thinking, become much more materialist in their manner of life and of course, they believe in satisfaction of needs as a factor of mental and physical well-being.

In order to make the degree of well-being measurable, the new capitalist society, started to analyze the relationship between personal income and purchasing power and as Andy Warhol mentioned it about the America of his time, Dear MR president, Liz Tyler, an average middle class man and a worker in a coal mine, and also the reader of this article, they are all drinking Coca-Cola. It means that for Warhol, the richest consumers buying the same things as the poorest consumers and this fact confirms the decrease of inequality in post war conditions of life in Unites states of America. The economic growth becomes important, if a welfare state wants to democratize satisfaction of human needs and for this reason, the existence of an enormous production system in consumer society is necessary, in order to produce the maximum amount of commodities as a guaranty for satisfaction of human needs. As a consequence, the economic growth will be a crucial subject for the consumption society, in which the satisfaction of material needs becomes a constitutive element of well-being.

It is maybe true, that we cannot reduce modern logic of inequality to the Marxist classic idea of a bipolarized society and a final war between the bourgeois and the proletariat because, the social and economic inequality, both of them are becoming really complicated and multidimensional. According to Baudrillard, maybe power and knowledge inequality are more important than the economic one, but he insists that the idea of the egalitarianism is just an illusion, because the satisfaction of vital needs in the consumer society remains secondary, especially in comparison to satisfaction of artificial needs in the process of social differentiation and social segregation. The existence of social privileges, is another logical result of inequality in the consumption society, that we are going to study in the next section.

Section B : social status and satisfaction of artificial needs

In the consumer society, human kind believes in his liberty of choice in the field of consumption but according to Baudrillard, the liberty of choice, is the most important obligation of modern time, because the dominant discourse, gives a social status to a consumer by analyzing his or her consuming modalities. In the consumer society, everybody must have a social and economical place and the capitalism, determines this place by observing and measuring the consumption models of people. And this is true that the consumption models varied a lot from the lower class to the upper class and inside each of them, for example the consumption models of rural lower class are not the same as the urban lower class and a student from a lower class, is not following the same consumption models as a housewife or as a manufacture worker and the same logic is reliable for a man or a woman from the middle class or from the upper class.

The social differentiation in contemporary world, is not separate from consumption models and we can determine status of an individual, by his buying behavior, his consumer habits and his shopping patterns. Baudrillard distinguishes between conscious and unconscious status of a consumer, consumer conscious status is in relationship with his shopping patterns as a way to distinguish himself or herself from the other one, especially by using a determinate category of commodities. The logic of differentiation, is a conscious result of consumerism both for the individual and for the society, it means that we can define and also protect our place among others by following particular consumption tendencies. The unconscious effect of consumerism, is in relationship with this fact that by using a certain category of commodities, unconsciously human subject going to obey and accept social norms of differentiation. To understand unconscious effect of consumerism, a good comprehension of the concept of exchange value and use value is more than necessary. The use value is linked to the practical use of an object or a commodity and also to the length of work that one needs in order to fabricate or produce something but the exchange value, is in relationship with social norms and the system of privileges. It means that using an object or a commodity, is not always for the satisfaction of a need, but this time especially in order to obey to the process of social differentiation. The exchange value of a commodity, can helps an individual to distinguish himself from another one in the process of social differentiation, or to helps an individual to separate himself from his current social status by imitating and following buying patterns of a superior social status. The use value in the consumer society, is less important next to the exchange value, because the consumer is not always using a commodity in order to satisfy a need but he uses it in order to participate in the process of social differentiation. The role of exchange value in the consumer society is important, because a huge part of social segregation depends on it.

According to Baudrillard, the consumer society is not at all egalitarian and the whole consumption patterns working in favor of inequality by differentiating people and placed them, in different social and economic categories. We can answer to this claim, by mentioning the role of consumption in the satisfaction of needs but the question is : what are exactly our needs? Baudrillard as a former Marxist in the sixties, distinguished severely between real and unreal human needs and the consumer society builds it-self on our artificial, unreal needs. As I mentioned in the beginning of this article, human vital needs are not numerous and the satisfaction of these needs, is not something impossible but the consumer society, pays more attention to artificial ones in order to maintain and preserve the system of domination and differentiation and the eternal existence of the consumer society.

Baudrillard believes that the unlimited creation of needs, which is in a close relationship with the idea of economic growth, shares nothing with the state of well-being and happiness because, in needs-creation selling system, the dominant discourse tries just to create needs that will create new needs, so the satisfaction of needs, in order to have still more needs and not the satisfaction of needs for the aim of pleasure or for the state of well-being. It means finally that the aim of consumption is not satisfaction but frustration. It is obvious that the creation of artificial needs, has nothing in commune with human nature and it is a pre-organized system to keep human desire unsatisfied, in order to make the consumer society working permanently. The capitalist discourse has changed the definition of human needs and transformed it to a kind of lucrative, economic process in order to produce the social privileges and maintain the logic of social differentiation. The production of needs is important for the survival of the consumer society, and of course every need, demands new commodities for its fake satisfaction and people by using them, will obey unconsciously to certain social principles and codes and consciously, they will differentiate their status from the other one. The press and the media are the mediums by which the consumer society informs consumers about new needs, (which are of course natural and necessary for human survival according to consumer society principles) and they also manipulate the codes of social differentiation to preserve inequality.

The consumer society and the existence of artificial needs, both of them are working completely in favor of production system. Artificial needs are unlimited and sometimes out of control and in the context of consumer society everything is clear from the beginning to the end, a huge amount of needs, for producing a huge amount of goods in order to preserve the mass consumption and the whole process, shares nothing with satisfaction or the state of well-being. The state of well-being is the new propaganda of the consumer society which is working well because nowadays, nobody takes care about the real, natural and unreal artificial human needs and we are all talking about needs and their satisfaction and no one really tries to distinguish between real one from the artificial one and that is exactly, what the consumer society is looking for. The human subject knows nothing about the idea of mass consumption for more production because, he believes in an illusionary idea of satisfaction and he considers himself to be the master of his desire which is still another illusionary claim. According to Baudrillard, The state of well-being has never been considered seriously in the process of consumption-production, because consumption and production are in a cyclic relationship, it means simply that one return always to the other one, and obviously, the principle of pleasure stays out-side of this cyclic logic.

Jacque Lacan, the famous French psychoanalyses that has been influenced a lot Baudrillard, believed that the object of human desire is lost and generally, desire relies on lack. It is true that the consumer society eliminated the state of well-being and pleasure from its consumption-production logic, but even if it was concentrated sincerely on the satisfaction of human desire, the results remain the same, because a complete and total satisfaction of desire is something impossible. The concept of balance which is coming from the field of economy to psychology and psychoanalyses, cannot explain the complexity of human desire which is not a calculator or a simple biological construction in seeking of pleasure. The specify of desire is in its relationship to the fact that it remains always unsatisfied so logically, the existence of a balance or a permanent state of well-being, both of them are illusionary, as it is illusionary to hear from the consumers saying that they satisfy their needs by consuming more and more.ⁱ

Section C : the central paradox of consumer society

As i mentioned in the beginning of this article, economic growth is an important concept for the consumer society, because consumption-production system, cannot work correctly in the time of financial crises so logically, economic stability is necessary for the survival of consumer society. Economic growth, in the consumer society is linked to the creation of artificial needs, but which one is really faster, the creation of needs or the production of commodities and objects. Lacan's idea of lack and the dependence of human desire on it, become important here because as I mentioned it before, human desire remains particular and exceptional because humankind cannot imagine a total satisfaction for it. So the creation of artificial needs remains unlimited, because human desire is never satisfied but our labor force and our natural resources, they are all limited and as a general consequence, creation of artificial needs is faster in comparison to production of the commodities, which means that the commodities are not all available in an egalitarian way for everybody.

According to Baudrillard , the consumer society tries to mask this fact that the production capacities of massif manufactures is limited, because it wants to make us believe in this claim that an equal access to commodities is possible for everyone but human desire and production strategies are not working with a same rhythm. It means that the consumer society cannot provide an equal access to commodities for every individual. Unlimited number of artificial needs and limited capacities of production constitute, a paradox in the center of the consumer society. The mythical and illusionary aspects of egalitarianism become clearer by considering this fact that there is a limited range of goods, for an unlimited number of artificial needs or to formulate it differently, the consumer society cannot be an egalitarian society, because of unlimited growth of needs and a limited increase of goods and the emergence of different privileges, started from here. Male privilege, white heterosexual privilege or Christian and class privilege, are maybe the most important among so many others. There is a huge difference between someone without any particular privilege and someone with a particular form of privilege and obviously, the satisfaction of needs is easier for the latter, rather than the former because, in the system of social differentiation the latter is placed better in comparison to the former. The privileges make easier the satisfaction of needs and they are, the immanent results of economic growth so we can conclude, that the consumption society is not an egalitarian society and the economic growth in it-elf, is not a tool in service of well-being and pleasure, but an important instrument for the survival of inequality and social unfair hierarchy.

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Biography

AmirpashaTavakkoli, recieved a bachelor degree in social sciences from Ferdowsi university of Mashad. After a master degree in psychoanalysis and political philosophy, from university Paris 8 and L'école des hautes etudes en sciences sociaux, he is actually a PHD student in psychoanalysis.