TANG Zhengdong

A path of interpreting the “consumer society”: The perspective of Karl Marx and its significance

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Abstract • When Western Marxist sociologists, such as Jean Buadrillard, constructed their critical theory of consumer society, they took the consumer society as an objective fact and methodologically restricted themselves to the non-historical method of sociology, making them unable to grasp the correct meaning of Karl Marx’s historical materialist methodology. Thus, they were unable to adequately critique and transcend consumer society. After spending the early 1850s building a theoretical foundation, Marx pointed out in 1857–1858 Economical Manuscript and 1861–1863 Economical Manuscript that the governing model of capital was so complicated that it made consumption very important to the socio-economic form. Moreover, he explained the way of surpassing the conscious form of fetishism developed in consumer society from the perspective of the development of capitalist production.

Keywords • consumer society, historical materialism, Karl Marx, process of production

Transcribed by Tang Tang, Zhang Rong and Tang Ling from Xueshu Yuekan • • • • • •

TANG Zhengdong
Philosophy Department, Nanjing University, Nanjing 210093, China
E-mail: ztang35@yahoo.com.cn
Rather than saying that “consumer society” is a new phenomenon that is completely different from traditional “production society,” it is preferable to say that “consumer society” is a real text that have emerged from the power discourse on this topic. Although many philosophical and sociological theorists have searched for ways to transcend consumer society, research on “consumer society” is rather lagging. “Consumer society” has been regarded as a kind of objective reality without any analysis. Due to this lag in theoretical analysis, the power discourse on “consumer society” was able to accumulate power in a process that turned it into a social reality with “quasi-objectivity.” Therefore, Baudrillard and some others condemned customers for conspiring with capital and taking part in capital’s colonization of them: “Different from feudality, our system operates on a relationship of collusion: modern consumers spontaneously absorb and shoulder this endless compulsory requirement” (Baudrillard 2001, p. 183). But his words are only half right. The consumers have indeed colluded with capital, but this is because critical theoreticians first unconsciously took part in the collusion with capital. When capitalist mainstream economists were constructing the power discourse and its text of “consumer society” by adopting concepts such as “buyer’s market,” it was interesting to note that the philosophers and sociologists who were the most critical agreed with mainstream economists on the academic premise: via the intermediary “customer” (corresponding to the “economic man” of the mainstream economists), on the basis of methodology of individualism, “consumer society” is considered as a premise, not a theoretical object needed to be proved valid. As a result, after they accomplished empirical descriptions of the above-mentioned “quasi-objective” social reality, and wanted to establish a kind of critical or transcendent theoretical dimension, these theoreticians had to rely on the liberation of Utopia (such as Henri Lefebvre), the “sudden death” of anarchism (such as Baudrillard), or practice without theoretical instruction (such as Guy-Ernest Debord).

Therefore, I do not agree with Baudrillard, Claus Offe and others with regard to consumer society being a new social formation different from production society. Baudrillard said in his book Consumer Society: “In the West, at least, the impassioned biographies of heroes of production are everywhere giving way today to biographies of heroes of consumption” (Baudrillard 1998, p. 45). If this is only a description of a certain kind of empirical phenomenon, it is still acceptable. But if it stands that Baudrillard has abandoned the dimension of production in social analysis, something is wrong. May I ask: Does this consumer society fall from a cloud? Does it not result from some transformation of production? Claus Offe has a similar view in his article Substitution Strategy