

From commodity fetishism to commodity narcissism

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Abstract

Marketing and consumer researchers have taken an increasing interest in the prevalence of and possibilities for enlightened consumerism. Contemporary studies show us, though, that ethically concerned consumers rarely act on their concerns – instead they act *as if* they were unenlightened about the negative effects of their consumption. The paper advances a theory for this contradiction that draws on Marx's work on commodity fetishism and Freud's analysis of sexual fetishism. In an attempt to reconcile the structural contexts of contemporary consumption with the psychic structures of the consuming subject proposed by each theorist, the paper concludes that narcissism, rather than fetishism, offers an explanation of this *as if* moment of contemporary consumption.

Keywords

Commodity fetishism, ethical consumption, Freud, Marx, narcissism

Introduction

[t]he enlightened consumer knows that the pair of Nikes they purchase is made under sweatshop conditions, but in the last instance act *as if* they did not know this (Fleming and Spicer 2005: 187, emphasis added)

The very existence of a free market requires that individuals be left alone to pursue what they hold to be their own interests rather than having their consumption decisions either dictated to them or excessively mediated for them (e.g. Friedman, 1993; Lerner, 1972; Mises, 2007: 269–72). On such a view commodity consumption must remain a matter of individual choice. Information can be

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provided and persuasive suggestions can certainly be made but the consumer must always remain the principally active agent. However, following the path-breaking work of Abercrombie et al. (1994), researchers have raised three powerful criticisms against this doctrine of consumer sovereignty. First, consumer sovereignty is said to be *self-contradictory*. Health and pleasure are routinely at odds with one another within many areas of consumption – think only of the examples of tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy foods – to the point where self-interest can become logically indistinguishable from self-harm (Read, 2007). Second, choice is said to have become *excessively burdensome* such that consumer sovereignty creates more problems for the individual consumer than it solves (Salecl, 2010, 2004; Schwartz, 2005). Finally, the doctrine of unencumbered choice is said to have led to *the externalization of morality* whereby a wider knowledge of the environmental consequences of consumption has not made ‘much of a dent’ in the pursuit of sustainable consumption (Gabriel and Lang, 2006: 34; see also e.g. Chatzidakis et al., 2006; Chatzidakis et al., 2007).

Based on these three lines of attack, researchers have focused on three as yet unanswered questions. First, they have questioned how the freedom of the individual to consume whatever and however they wish can be reconciled with the ends of personal health, personal efficiency and all things extra-individual. Second, they have asked at what point the freedom to choose becomes oppressive. Finally, they have investigated how the unqualified right to consume can be reconciled with the duty to act responsibly. Iterations, rather than answers, of these important questions are increasingly prevalent within marketing and consumer research debates (e.g. Bauman, 2007; Bauman, 2008; Crane, 2000; Dolan, 2002; Kilbourne et al., 1997; Miller, 2001; Salzer-Mörling and Strannegård, 2007; Schwarzkopf, 2011; Wilk, 2001; Schor et al., 2010) and the persistent criticism of the consumer sovereignty model is gradually giving way to a reform, if not a revolution, in the very ways in which the consuming subject is understood within marketing theory literature.

Readers of *Marketing Theory* will, of course, recognize that the theorization of the consuming subject cannot be separated from any political programme concerning consumption. *Politically speaking*, Gabriel and Lang are by no means alone when they insist that ‘[t]he challenges of creating modes of consumption that are at least environmentally benign, and at best environmentally beneficial, is now the great challenge of the age’ (2006: 22). Based on the critiques of consumer sovereignty, marketing and consumer researchers are all too aware that this challenge cannot be adequately addressed by launching a series of heartfelt appeals towards the rational benevolence of the consuming subject. This is because the average consumer *already* knows only all too well that their daily bread and clothing, as well as their privileged luxuries, are almost always made possible only by the existence of exploitative and unsafe working conditions that damage the social and physical environment. It is widely acknowledged, in other words, that a thriving consumer culture cannot but perpetuate environmental degradation and socio-political inequality – *and yet* – consumer culture marches on, triumphant.

Perhaps there is something about the idea of the consumer *itself* that militates in this regard. Indeed, perhaps the contemporary critique of consumer sovereignty needs to open up not only to a re-inscription of what the post-sovereign consumer might *do* but also towards a re-imagination of what this post-sovereign consumer might *be*. *Conceptually speaking*, therefore, the above political imperatives have led to a broader going re-engagement with the idea of the consuming subject and particularly with Marx’s designation of it within his writing on commodity fetishism (1976: 163–77; e.g. Böhm and Batta, 2010; Fleming and Spicer, 2005; Jones, 2010; Sloterdijk, 1988; Žižek, 2008). This re-engagement, for its part, has routinely homed in on what might be called the

as if moment of commodity consumption. Put simply, at the very moment at which consumers consume, they often act *as if* they did not know what they know only all too well, namely, that the consumed commodity may not have been the best possible choice, that it may be detrimental to their physical and psychological health, that it might harm the environment, perpetuate sweatshop labour, and so on. Rather than seeing these *as if* moments as contradictory to the nature of the consuming subject, such analyses insist that they are constitutive of that subject. Thus, we now need to reconceptualize the consuming subject in its propensity towards such *as if* moments, rather than grafting these moments onto a by now discredited rational decision-making model for which they can count only as exceptions.

Within this paper we follow the lead of such predecessors concerning the need for a new theory of the consuming subject beyond the model of sovereignty. Our proposal takes seriously the possibility that consumption very often occurs not despite its logical, instrumental and moral contradictions but rather as a direct result of them. That is to say, what is missing from the ongoing discussions of enlightened consumption is a theory of the consuming subject wherein even the extremes of sadism cannot be ruled out in advance (Fitchett, 2002). We suggest that Freud's concept of narcissism offers a fruitful avenue beyond the Marxist concept of commodity fetishism in this regard. Commodity fetishism has become something of an obligatory rite of passage within the discussion of enlightened consumption. However, as we describe, this rite of passage has often led to a dead end. In its place, we offer a concept of *commodity narcissism* wherein consumption is understood not as an instance of other-denying self-interest, as would be the case in the economic language of externalities, but rather as an expression of other-abasing self-love, as in the language of psychoanalysis (see also Fullerton, 2007; Stein, 2003). Commodity narcissism, in short, is more than a desire to have – it is a desire to have at the expense of others. As such, it asks us not to deny the darker sides of consumption but to directly face up to them as a means of better understanding them.

Consuming as if production didn't matter – The problem of commodity fetishism

The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an 'immense collection of commodities'; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form. Our investigation therefore begins with the analysis of the commodity. (Marx, 1976: 125)

Bringing to a close the challenging analysis of the commodity form, the brief section of Marx's *Capital Volume One* entitled 'The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret' (1976: 163–77) demonstrates how, at the heart of consumption, there lies an implicit denial of the forces and the relations of production that make commodity consumption possible in the first place. At the very moment that we consume, Marx explains, we relate to the object consumed on its own terms. We mistakenly see it as a self-sustained and self-sustaining object imbued with qualities, characteristics and properties of its own. We thereby make a *fetish* of the commodity. We deny what Marx's analysis up until this point had already made very clear, namely, that the various qualities, characteristics and properties of the commodity form can only be explained in terms of the various qualities, characteristics and properties of *labour* – where labour is understood as both a general form-giving force *and* as a geographically and sociologically dispersed set of specific activities.

Commodity fetishism is a crucial component in the operation of capitalism and a crucial concept for understanding how capitalism works. The emergence of the capitalist mode of production itself is synonymous, for Marx, with the emergence of commodity fetishism. Although

he points out that capitalist society by no means holds a monopoly over commodity fetishism, in earlier times the commodity form's 'fetish character is still relatively easy to penetrate' (Marx, 1976: 176). The mystification of commodities in capitalism is, consequently, not simply a historical fact. It is also a methodological breakthrough. Here Lukács (1971: 83–110) insists that Marx's general critique of political economy harbours a particular critique of commodity fetishism as a necessary moment occurring within its overall movement. Indeed, Marx's analysis of capitalism across the four originally intended volumes of *Capital* commences with a fine-grained analysis of the commodity form precisely because it is within the commodity form's own nuances that capitalism's spiralling complexities are to be initially uncovered. For as long as we analyse the mode of circulation, the individual commodity appearing as its 'elementary form' (Marx, 1976: 125), we forego an analysis of the mode of production that produces the commodity as that which initially appears as the most elementary form of a capitalist society. The analysis of the mode of circulation occurs later on in the Marxist system (see Marx, 1978). We cannot start there, however, not at least until we have first of all learned to see how the commodity becomes fetishized both logically and historically.

Consumers, along with consumer analysts ignorant of Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, want commodities to be nothing more than objects in a marketplace. The process of commodity fetishism allows them to bracket off the commodity form from the various 'metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties' that make possible the very existence of commodities (Marx, 1976: 163). Commodity fetishists do not concern themselves with the journey a commodity takes to a marketplace. Indeed, bedazzled by the proliferation of commodities, we, as consumers and consumer researchers, routinely deceive ourselves into believing that, or at least acting *as if*, whatever initially appears as a 'fantastic form of a relation between things' can be focused upon and analysed at the level of such appearances alone (Marx, 1976: 176). This theoretical and practical self-deception is what Marx has in mind when he discusses commodity fetishism. To go beyond it, if only philosophically, would mean to explain these superficial relationships in terms of the much more profound but ultimately determinative 'social relation between men themselves' (Marx, 1976: 176).

It is, though, simply not enough for individuals to taste the labour of the baker in the crust of the bread as a means of overcoming fetishism. Commodity fetishism is inherently social in its causes and conditions. It is determined by a series of factors that exist outside of the individual subject, factors that subsequently call the individual subject to respond to the world of objects within which they exist, and in so doing it naturalizes that very world in the eyes of the consuming subject (Althusser, 2008). Consequently, until such a time as the individual subject's overcoming of commodity fetishism becomes objectively generalized, commodity fetishism will continue to prevail. Marx is very clear on this point. He tells us that commodity fetishism's 'veil is not removed from the countenance of the social life-process, i.e. the process of material production, until it becomes production by freely associated men, and stands under conscious and planned control' (1976: 173).

Of course, the existential trials and tribulations of the isolated heroic would-be moral consumer floating in the world of potentially consumable objects are not Marx's real interest in his analysis of commodity fetishism. As Lukács puts it 'the real motor forces of history are independent of man's (psychological) consciousness of them' (1971: 47). The fetishism of commodities is, for Marx, an individualized symptom of a much broader sociological phenomenon. As isolated individuals, we may well learn to disenchant the commodity form once we take our bearings from its socio-historic determination but this potential moment of individual enlightenment remains

effectively redundant. To overcome the fetishism of commodities is to overcome the nature of capitalist social relations themselves. Our own improved understanding of these relations changes nothing. Everyday experience itself serves as the best guide here: as consumer research shows us, with the best will in the world, we continue to consume commodities *as if* we did not know what we know only all too well about the various uncomfortable facts about production (Chatzidakis et al. 2006; Chatzidakis et al., 2007).

The disavowal of the hidden world of production (Marx, 1976: 279) is today directly written into the ongoing consumption of the commodity form (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007; Frank 1998; Frank 2000; Kozinets, 2002). Indeed, Žižek (2009: 61) argues that the fetishism of commodities only *increases* the more we tunnel into its hidden reality. We are not prepared to acknowledge the adverse consequences of our actions. We might know about these consequences but this knowledge only serves to make it *more* difficult to act accordingly. Rather, we take recourse into increasingly convincing forms of denial and disavowal for self-protection and justification. Žižek continues:

the fetish is the embodiment of the Lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth . . . a fetish can play the very constructive role of allowing us to cope with a harsh reality: fetishists are not dreamers lost in their own private worlds, they are thoroughgoing ‘realists,’ able to accept the way things are because by clinging to their fetish they are able to mitigate the full impact of reality. (Žižek, 2009: 65)

It is, then, very easy to *believe* ourselves to be beyond the grasp of commodity fetishism. All we have to do is draw attention to the fact that we know of and are deeply moved by the hardships that have befallen the producers of this or that commodity. Who, after all, has not been tempted by the story that while others consume in a morally reprehensible manner, we are all too aware of and troubled by the woes of the world? On Žižek’s analysis, however, it is not the one who does not know the adverse consequences of their actions but rather the one who does know these adverse consequences and yet acts *as if* they did not know them that qualifies as today’s commodity fetishist. When consumption is narrated through excuses, rationalizations and guilt Žižek asks us to read only commodity fetishism. On this analysis, commodity consumption *as such* is a fetish that we hold onto in order to deny the fact that what we demand of producers, that they continue to make commodities we want in conditions we do not approve of, may not be ultimately justifiable in our eyes, let alone theirs.

The psychology of (commodity) fetishism’s *as if*

[W]hat fetishism gives body to is precisely my disavowal of knowledge, my refusal to subjectively assume what I know. (Žižek, 2009: 61)

What other men have to woo and make exertion for can be had by the fetishist with no trouble at all. (Freud, 2001b: 154)

What is at stake in this *as if* moment of consumption? What makes it possible? Why is it so prevalent? For many, the clues to this puzzle lie in the attempt to read Marx’s work in terms of its psychological resonances and aspects. As Amariglio and Callari insist ‘[t]he mystery of commodity exchange to which commodity fetishism refers is a question primarily for and about the subject’ (1993: 203). The work of Billig (1999a, 1999b) is exemplary in this regard. Commodity fetishism, he argues, can be said to contain an implicit psychology wherein its various

concealments operate 'through a process of social forgetting', the mechanisms of which can be theorized psychoanalytically (1999a: 315). Adorno (2001) too understands Marxism as a system of thought that is capable of accommodating Freudian categories when he describes the consumer of mass produced cultural commodities as a psychologically regressive subject. For a number of contemporary commentators (e.g. Gemerchack, 2004; Miklitsch, 1996, 1998; Pietz, 1985, 1993), however, the question of whether we can reconcile the work of Marx and Freud, and the Marxist and Freudian fetishes in particular, remains open.

As it is for Marx, fetishism is a key concept for Freud. It is intimately tied to his infamous discussion of the castration complex. Freud suggests that young males overcome a fear of losing their penis, a fear brought about in the encounter with the female body, by creating a substitute idea – a fetish – that helps them cope with the trauma of reality. The young male retains his belief in the idea that everyone has a penis while also giving it up by believing that some people (females) lose their penises whereas others do not. This realization, in turn, becomes a source of intense anxiety for the young boy while simultaneously allowing him to make a certain amount of sense of his traumatic experiences without succumbing to terror or despair (Freud, 2001b: 154). Freud's concept of fetishism is, in this sense, a refusal to know. Indeed, British psychotherapist Adam Phillips tells us that 'a good fetish' works by virtue of the fact 'that it keeps incompatible ideas alive' (1993: 93).

Freud also explores the psychoanalytic aspects of fetishism as a refusal to know in the contexts of psychoanalytic therapy (2001f), religion (2001e) and pedagogy (2001d). In all these cases, Freud argues, 'the clarification of a set of facts may be expected to bring us a gain in knowledge' (2001e: 7); and yet this reasonable and logical expectation is usually proven to be unfounded. For instance, while Freud (2001f: 233) expected his patients to be cured and his work as an analyst to be complete once they had recognized their neuroses and taken responsibility for their traumas he discovered that therapy did not work this way. Phillips (2002: 65) comes in on this point:

Anyone who has experience of psychoanalysis – and perhaps of other forms of therapy – knows that both the analyst and the patient can come up with a very good, facilitative redescription of an inhibition and that it can be either resisted by the patient or, more interestingly, accepted by the patient (if not actually considered to be something of a revelation) and still not make a blind bit of difference.

Freud observed similar refusals to know in our cultural and sexual lives. When it comes to the emergence of religious systems, Freud explains how a collective rejection of a particular religious system as irrational, superstitious and hypercritical often gives rise to the establishment of another one that is just as irrational, superstitious and hypercritical (2001e: 118). In the case of pedagogy, Freud observes that after children have been educated in the facts of life, they 'know something that they did not know before, but they make no use of the new knowledge that has been presented to them' (2001d: 234). They continue to believe that babies come from storks even though they know it is not true. Freud explains that '[f]or a long time after they have been given sexual enlightenment they behave like primitive races who have had Christianity thrust upon them and who continue to worship their old idols in secret' (2001d: 234).

Through these various examples Freud illustrates that within our psychological, social and cultural lives 'denial is not a refutation, an innovation is not necessarily an advance' (2001e: 131). We can increase our knowledge about something yet alter 'nothing else' (Freud, 2001d: 233). However, this seeming contradiction did not trouble Freud. Freud believed that humans were essentially ambivalent creatures – our affectionate feelings are always mixed with hostile ones and

our understanding of reality, the reality principle, is founded on our experiences of pleasure, the pleasure principle. Accordingly, Freud (2001e) stresses that these refusals to know occur precisely within instances where our desires and wishes influence what we consider to be true. Within such instances, he explains ‘our intellect very easily goes astray without any warning . . . nothing is more easily believed by us than what, without reference to the truth, comes to meet our wishful illusions’ (2001e: 129).

For Freud, therefore, just as for Marx, fetishism can be characterized as a dynamic process whereby the subject refuses to know something that they know all too well. What Freud adds to the analysis of fetishism is a sense for how this very refusal to know itself occurs at the level of the individual not only in consumption but within our everyday dealings with the world. Freud shows how and why knowledge does not always gain the upper hand by explaining the contradictory relations of the subject to the world in terms of the contradictions inherent within the subject. Put more simply, he tells us that our desires rather than our experiences are the mechanisms through which we engage with the world. It is then understandable why we deny the reality of our experiences – in order to preserve our hopes for what we wish to have been the case.

While the commodity fetishism analysis presents us with the fact that knowledge does not always drive action, Freud’s analysis of fetishism goes beyond this insight. He explains these contradictions not with recourse to the notion of a benevolent consuming subject who becomes self-contradictory within a capitalist society but rather by making the psychoanalytically sanctioned observation that the subject *as such* is a self-contradictory entity. For Freud, in other words, the apparent paradox of the *as if* of commodity fetishism makes perfect sense when approached psychoanalytically.

As if a general theory of (commodity) fetishism were possible

Both Marx and Freud draw upon religious analogies in setting out their respective accounts of fetishism. When discussing fetishism as a tendency for people to substitute the true object of their sexual desires with a substitute, Freud tells us that these ‘substitutes are with some justice likened to the fetishes in which savages believe that their gods are embodied’ (2001a: 153). Similarly, Marx (1976: 165) argues that a religious analogy perfectly demonstrates the nature of the commodity fetish, since: ‘There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race’.

Both theorists also characterize fetishism as a form of concealing and displacing connection between subject and object. Fetishism is the name given by both Freud and Marx to a sort of displaced, somehow deficient subjective connection to an object, a connection that conceals something more profound and primordial. Likewise, for both Freud and Marx, fetishism is a problem to be overcome in its very working through. Commodity fetishism can only be truly overcome in the overcoming of capitalism while sexual fetishism can only be worked upon within psychoanalytic therapy.

Yet in spite of these similarities there are many important differences between the two notions of fetishism offered by Freud and Marx, which makes a meaningful synthesis notoriously difficult (Mioyasaki, 2002). Freud, for example, asserts that fetishism is sensuous. We know the objects of our fetish through our senses. We smell the foot, we see the underwear and so forth. Marx, on the other hand, contends that commodity fetishism is super-sensual. As Žižek puts it ‘in Marxism a fetish conceals the positive network of social relations, whereas in Freud a fetish conceals the lack

[“castration”] around which the symbolic network is articulated’ (2008: 50). Additionally, Freud points out that some level of fetishism is normal and healthy. Not all fetishes are pathological and in need of treatment. This means that for Freud the prevalence and predominance of fetishism is contingent upon each individual. For Marx, however, we cannot overcome commodity fetishism without also overcoming the commodity form.

For some researchers these conceptual differences between Marx’s and Freud’s accounts are too powerful to allow a meaningful integration of their work. So the challenge for these two concepts of fetishism’s inheritors is not simply one of reconciling their radically contradictory origins. It is rather one of deciding what is to be done about their seemingly fundamental irreconcilability. Hornborg (2001: 492), for example, neglects a review of psychoanalytic discussions of fetishism in his analysis because, ‘[a]lthough they make intriguing reading’, whenever they are engaged they create more problems than they solve. In contrast, Baudrillard (1981) points out that Marx’s commodity fetishism can be said to involve a generalized reliance upon a notion of false consciousness that denies the very possibility of any given individual properly transcending their own fetishized condition of their own accord. Hence his suggestion that Freud’s is the much more operational of the two concepts of fetishism. For Baudrillard (1981), Marx’s concept of fetishism is tautological, whereas Freud’s is properly diagnostic. Accordingly, the search for the Holy Grail of a post-Marxist, post-Freudian theory of fetishism, the so-called ‘general theory of fetishism’ remains presently unfulfilled albeit not for want of trying (see Miklitsch 1996, 1998 for an overview). Rather than attempt to contribute to this project, we suggest a side-step away from commodity fetishism is required if the *as if* moment of enlightened consumption is to be understood.

From (commodity) fetishism to commodity narcissism

Freud’s own work on the nature of commodity consumption as an example of *narcissism* rather than fetishism warrants further consideration here. At the end of the second section of ‘On Narcissism: An Introduction’, Freud provides a brief analysis of consumption practices in which ‘affectionate parents’ engage (1991: 90–91). For Freud (1991: 91), parents enact ‘a revival and reproduction of their own narcissism’ through their children’s consumption. By narcissism Freud means a process wherein desire ‘has been withdrawn from the external world’ and ‘directed’ onto the self (1991: 75). This redirection of desire may take the form of a person who ‘looks at’ their own body as an object of desire – ‘that is to say, strokes it and fondles it till he obtains complete satisfaction through these activities’ (Freud, 1991: 65). However, for Freud, it is rare that a narcissist can completely satisfy their narcissistic desires with recourse to themselves alone. More typically, narcissism entails the projection of desire ‘beyond the limits of narcissism’ as narcissists ‘attach’ their desires to external objects (Freud, 1991: 85). Repressive psychological processes such as sublimation and identification help the narcissist here by sending their narcissistic desires out into the world while simultaneously retaining their original aims (Freud, 1991: 94).

Freud (1991) (and this is worth repeating) develops his concept of narcissism during one of the few occasions within which he writes explicitly about commodity consumption. Narcissistic desires are often deemed to be socially unacceptable and are therefore inhibited. But in consumption they find a socially acceptable form of expression. Freud illustrates this point with a discussion of how parents are able to satisfy their own narcissistic desires through their children, thanks to consumption practices. He explains that parents are

inclined to suspend in the child's favour the operation of all the cultural acquisitions which their own narcissism has been forced to respect, and to renew on his behalf the claims to privileges which were long ago given up by themselves. (1991: 85)

The logic of this psychoanalytically derived concept of narcissism runs as follows:

The child shall have a better time than his parents; he shall not be subject to the necessities which they have recognized as paramount in life. Illness, death, renunciation of enjoyment, restrictions on his own will, shall not touch him . . . he shall once more really be the centre and core of creation – 'His Majesty the Baby', as we once fancied ourselves. The child shall fulfil those wishful dreams of the parents which they never carried out. (1991: 85)

In this short analysis, then, Freud alerts us to the narcissistic strand running through commodity consumption. Parents buy things for their children not just to please their children but also to please themselves. When they shower expensive toys, food and clothes onto their children, parents are not simply ensuring that their child has the best products on the market. Much more importantly, as far as Freud is concerned, they are satisfying their own narcissistic desires. First, they are able to entertain the notion that they are acting out of selfless love and, therefore, add to their idealized image of themselves. Second, they can make up for desires that they were forced to inhibit when they were children by ensuring that their children, with whom they identify, need not ever know of these inhibitions. For Freud (1991: 91), then, this example of consumption shows us that 'Parental love, which is so moving and at bottom so childish, is nothing but the parents' narcissism born again, which, transformed into object-love, unmistakably reveals its former nature'.

We would like to expand on Freud's analysis here. Behind his modest claims concerning the narcissism of parent's consumption is a particular understanding of the self-interest of a consumer and a particular understanding of consumption as an ambivalent practice. For Freud (2001c) we can only understand our relationships with our possessions and our consumption habits by recognizing that here, as in many other cases, we express something that is cruel, destructive and narcissistic *even while* we believe altruism and benevolence to have been set in motion by our actions. As we have seen, the consuming subject, indeed the subject as such, is for Freud (2001c) fundamentally ambivalent – simultaneously altruistic *and* selfish, rational *and* irrational, aware *and* unaware of their actions and motivations. This presents us with a rather uncomfortable vision of the human subject, one that we would all too readily choose to deny were it simply a matter of choosing which, for Freud (2001c: 111), it certainly is not:

The element of truth behind all this, which people are so ready to disavow, is that men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbor is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and kill him. *Homo homini lupus*.

If Freud is to be taken at his word here, it means that the prevalence of the *as if* moment of commodity fetishism makes a lot more sense than we might have been prepared to admit. On this reading, it is not simply the case that consumers act *as if* they were unaware of the exploitative social relations that create the products they consume. Nor is it even the case that they contradict

themselves when they consume *as if* they did not know what they know only all too well. On the Freudian reading, rather, the knowledge of the reality of production, its exploitative nature and damaging environmental consequences, which we would rather deny at the moment of consumption, is actually part of what compels us to consume in the first place. When we consume, and thereby perpetuate the suffering of others, what we give expression to is a side of us that we may want to deny – a side of us that continues to exist precisely because we so actively strive to repress it. The knowledge of other people's suffering that our consumption perpetuates is precisely what satisfies our destructive and narcissistic desires, in this sense. This sadistic pleasure, according to Freud (2001c: 143), is precisely what affords 'the narcissistic satisfaction of being able to think oneself better than others'.

In other words, Freud's interpretation of consumption as a narcissistic practice can now be expanded to include instances where we consume to harm others and, consequently, elevate ourselves over them. It is, in other words, a small leap from Freud's analysis of consumption as an inherently narcissistic act, to uncovering destructive impulses behind our consumption that both feed and are fed by our narcissistic desires. Thus we can see that not only do consumers make purchasing decisions in order to satisfy their own needs, they also consume as a means of depriving and harming others. Such a reading is supported by Lasch (1979) who, in a somewhat different context, argued that the narcissist 'divides society into two groups: the rich, great, and the famous on the one hand and the common herd on the other' (1979: 84). This insight, of course, brings us back to fetishism. We create fetishes precisely because we need to tell ourselves a story that offers a more endearing self-portrayal than the depiction we find in the idea of our being narcissistic. The fetish provides us with this story, just as the castration complex allows the young boy to deal with the threat of potential penislessness. As Billig (1999a) demonstrates, commodity fetishism satisfies our collective pleasure principle – it pushes 'out of consciousness those sociological realities and an incipient sense of conscience which would spoil the consuming party' (1999a: 321). The commodity fetish allows us to relate to commodities in such a way as to construct an idealized sense of self and draw attention away from the possibility that when we consume, what we are actually doing is wilfully engaging in the elevation of ourselves at the cost of the destruction of others. As Billig (1999a) continues, 'My goods, in order to be mine, and to be enjoyed as such, must be separated from the bodies which have created them' (1999: 319). The narcissist, therefore, becomes a fetishist so as to let go of everything unpleasant contained within the truth of their being a narcissist deep down.

Discussion: The amnesia of the *as if*

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their *self-love*, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages. (Smith, 1986: 119, emphasis added)

Freud believed that it is impossible for a human to live in common with others without occasionally giving vent to the lurking 'temptation to ill-treat his neighbour' (2001c: 113). We have suggested that this statement *cannot* be dismissively read as little more than a passing remark in so far as marketing and consumer researchers are concerned. Indeed, we have argued that within this statement lies the seed of an analysis of the darker side of consumption, an analysis derived out of an understanding of the consuming subject as a subject that does not always have and act upon the

noblest of intentions. Read alongside Freud's (1991) account of 'His Majesty the Baby' – one of the few occasions where Freud offers us a direct analysis of consumer behaviour – we have suggested that the *as if* moment of commodity fetishism might be interpreted not simply as a failing of knowledge and not even as a compelling contradiction but rather as a clue revealing the fundamental nature of the contemporary consumer itself – a subject that might be understood as inherently narcissistic in the Freudian sense of the term.

In this regard, our analysis follows the recent move towards behavioural economics from classical economics. The latter, inspired by Smith, sees producers as motivated by self-love but consumers as motivated by rational decision-making processes, while the former has attempted to offer an account of the consumer as an ambivalent being who is both 'smart and dumb' (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008: 19) – an economic actor whose acts frequently contradict their intentions (Read, 2007). We believe that explicitly acknowledging the role of narcissism in consumption, as Smith does for production, helps us to explain the *as if* moment that social theorists such as Žižek (2008; 2009) and Fleming and Spicer (2005) have observed within contemporary consumption practices. It also offers a possible explanation for how the pursuit of a well intentioned progressive consumerism has found it so difficult to succeed, namely, that awareness of the reprehensible cannot of itself serve to overcome the reprehensible. Recognizing that consumers are narcissistic – understood through Freud's work – provides us with the explanation that enlightening consumers of the moral consequences of their actions will make it more likely that they will continue with those actions. To do so will make consumption all the more powerful as a way of satisfying their narcissistic desires.

So, by exploring our relationship to commodities as narcissistic we believe that we can begin to gain a fuller understanding of the problem of commodity fetishism. Commodity fetishism, we argued, is a process wherein an individual consumer refuses to know something that they know only all too well. Drawing on Freud's work on fetishism we asserted that this refusal, while facilitated by the analysis of the commodity form as Marx observes it, is also powered by individual desires that are shaped by *both* the social and the psychological structures. Rather than accepting the dead-end of either a Marx- or a Freud-type conclusion, we suggested that Freud's work on narcissism offers worthwhile insights into the psychological aspects of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism and that Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, for its part, helps us make sense of Freud's enigmatic comments upon the nature of commodity consumption as a narcissistic phenomenon.

This understanding of the relationship between individual consumers and the system of production that provides them with their daily bread helps to explain commodity fetishism in a way that, we hope, meaningfully integrates the work of Marx and Freud for the purposes of marketing and consumer research. This daily bread, for the commodity fetishist, that is to say the rational consuming subject of classical economics, is simply one useful and exchangeable object among others which may or may not be chosen for consumption. The daily bread, in the Marxist analysis, is still the same hunger satisfying object, of course, albeit a hunger satisfying object that cannot be isolated to utility or exchangeability alone but must rather have its utility and exchangeability explained in terms of the labour of baking and the social position of the baker. The bread, for the Freudian fetishist, offers insight into the subject that desires it – this subject relates to bread as an object of desire and in so doing attributes to it a meaning that cannot be reduced to function or subsistence. The commodity narcissist, finally, sees the bread as a potential expression of his or her idealized self, an expression that must be denied to all other potentially self-expressing selves. At the same time, far from acting *as if* they are unaware of the social relations that have produced the

bread, relations that they may claim to find morally reprehensible, the narcissist enjoys their ability to act reprehensibly through consumption. Whichever way we look at the bread, therefore, we have to have recourse to a certain model of the consuming subject – a subject that certainly has economically isolatable characteristics but just as certainly cannot be reduced to these economic characteristics alone.

This paper's concern with the *as if* moment of commodity fetishism, while offering an innovative and dynamic model of the consuming subject, also adds to analyses of the role of amnesia within marketing and consumer research (Tadajewski, 2008; Tadajewski and Saren, 2008; see also Newton, 2010; Parker, 2001), albeit by diverging from it in two important ways. First, we investigate amnesia as a phenomenon occurring at the level of the consuming subject *itself* rather than at the level of the historically evolving tradition of marketing and consumer research which has sought (and continues to seek) to make sense of that subject. Second, we investigate amnesia not in the sense of a neglectful letting go but rather in the sense of a dynamic disavowal. Amnesia, in this context, has much more to it than a passive forgetting or a more cynical ignoring. Amnesia here speaks to the process whereby the consumer acts in such a way as to confront their knowledge about the consequences of their consumption, yet fails to allow this knowledge to guide their actions. This form of amnesia, we propound, offers yet another argument for why the consuming subject is *not* a rational utility maximizer within the context of scarce resources. The consuming subject acts *as if* they did not know what they know they know all too well – there is very little of the rational consumer here. This very fact has given occasion to the analysis undertaken within this paper.

Our call to marketing and consumer researchers is to explore this darker, narcissistic side of modern consumption in more detail. Of course, this is not to say that researchers have not already made significant headway in this regard. Illich (1973: 102), for instance, tells us that 'Almost everyone in rich societies is a destructive consumer. Almost everyone is, in some way, engaged in aggression against the milieu'. Likewise, Fitchett (2002) explores consumers as sadists and Graeber (2011) argues that consumption activities have always included an element of wilful destruction, while Bauman (2007), Billig (1999a) and Schor et al. (2010) all directly incorporate narcissism into their accounts of contemporary consumption. However, to date, no one has explored the *as if* moment of enlightened consumption through these perspectives. To do so would mean to entertain the notion that the sovereign consumer is actually a tyrant who needs others to suffer so that they can continue to reign. Indeed, narcissism, for Freud, is a problem that we need to deal with. But we cannot get to the heart of the problem for as long as we continue to misdiagnose the root – the nature of the way in which we relate to the objects we consume and, moreover, a false and benevolent idealized vision of the consuming subject which is routinely refuted by the actual nature of the subject as routinely observed within psychoanalysis:

I too think it quite certain that a real change in the relations of human beings to possessions would be of more help in this direction than any ethical commands; but the recognition of this fact among socialists has been obscured and made useless for practical purposes by a fresh idealistic misconception of human nature (Freud, 2001c: 143).

Marketing and consumer research has a very important role to play here in that it might seek to better understand the causes of commodity narcissism, better conceptualize the various manifestations of commodity narcissism and, of course, better propose alleviations of the doubtless problem of commodity narcissism. Such analysis might employ measurement of narcissism

developed within psychology – tools that have been applied to the consumption of food among sufferers of anorexia and bulimia (Emmons, 1987; Steiger et al., 1997). Alternatively, it might take its bearings from what has been outlined above, as well as simultaneously developing upon the frequently espoused etymological insight that consumption is, in essence, first and foremost an act of destruction (Bauman, 2007; Gabriel and Lang, 2006). Such analysis would of necessity engage with the question of why the consumer consumes *as if* production did not hold sway by seeking to account for this seeming contradiction beyond an idealized model of the benevolent consuming subject which has long ago been discredited. The concept of commodity narcissism, we believe, offers a very good place to start.

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