

Identity, choice and consumer freedom – the new opiates? A psychoanalytic interrogation

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Abstract

Psychoanalysis opens a variety of windows into understanding contemporary consumption and consumerism. The psychoanalytic theory of defence and the unconscious enables us to understand why commodities, from fast cars to luxury chocolate, so readily stand in to offer substitute gratification for deeper repressed desires and why the meaning of such commodities is liable to become mobile and unstable (Baudrillard, 1988 [1970]). The psychoanalytic concepts of narcissism (Freud, 1914) and the mirror stage (Lacan, 2006) provide powerful entry points into understanding our culture's obsession with image (Cluley and Dunne, 2012), whilst the theory of neurosis offers significant insights into the addictive and deeply irrational qualities of contemporary consumption (Lasch, 1980). Object relations theory (Winnicott, 1964) enables us to understand how material objects, from early childhood attachments to teddy bears, act as bridges between our sense of self and what we come to view as an external world deeply indifferent to our desires. Several other psychoanalytic concepts and ideas have proven particularly helpful in contemporary discourses on consumption. This essay draws its inspiration from Freud's theory of religion (Freud, 1927, 1930) to test the view that the consumer's freedom to choose and construct an identity is an illusion in the technical sense – a fantasy that discloses deeper desires and offers substitute gratifications for the discontents inflicted on us by contemporary consumer culture. Like earlier illusions, the illusion of freedom and the derivative illusions of choice and identity may provide some consolation, but, arguably, then deepen the discontents for which they purport to offer comfort.

What bound me to Jewry was, I am ashamed to admit, neither faith nor national pride, for I have always been an unbeliever and was brought up without any religion though not without a respect for what are called the 'ethical' standards of human civilization. Whenever I felt an inclination to national enthusiasm I strove to suppress it as harmful and wrong, alarmed by the warning examples of the peoples among whom we Jews live. But plenty of other things remained over to make the attraction of Jewry and Jews irresistible – many obscure emotional forces, which were the more powerful the less they could be expressed in words, as well as a clear consciousness of inner identity, the safe privacy (Heimlichkeit) of a common mental construction.

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And beyond this there was a perception that it was to my Jewish nature alone that I owed two characteristics that had become indispensable to me in the difficult course of my life. Because I was a Jew I found myself free of many prejudices which restricted others in the use of their intellect; and as a Jew I was prepared to join the Opposition, and to do without agreement with the ‘compact majority’. (Freud, 1926: 272; Emphasis added)

This rich extract from a speech delivered to a Jewish society in Vienna is the only occasion when Sigmund Freud used the term ‘identity’ in anything other than a matter-of-fact sense. This may seem curious for a thinker who theorized extensively and originally on the concept of identification, but it must be born in mind, of course, that this was long before the concept of identity had been embraced by scholars as the ‘master signifier’ (Alvesson et al., 2008) in numerous discourses of work, gender, politics, culture and consumption. Yet what is striking in Freud’s description of identity above is its ‘modernity’. It is clearly linked to his self-perception as a Jew but is also used to describe the link between a personal experience and the large social forces of nation and religion. What is also revealing in Freud’s statement is an oblique but unmistakable reference to the emotional and unconscious qualities of identity (‘many obscure emotional forces’) that often remain ignored in contemporary discussions. Another noteworthy aspect of the statement above is its clear suggestion of struggle (‘I strove to suppress it’), something that characterizes most current conceptualizations of identity. The statement explicitly refers to the ‘other’ and to the opposition from which identity stems. Finally, the statement clearly alludes to choice (‘whenever I felt an inclination to national enthusiasm I strove to suppress it as harmful and wrong’), something that has come to the forefront of discussions of identity construction in late modernity.

Identity and its relation to choice are the central foci of this essay, which argues that both identity and choice can be approached, from a psychoanalytic angle, as *wish fulfilments*. They are, in other words, mental constructions in which unconscious desire takes precedence over conscious reality testing, ideas that emerge from the desires and the anxieties of the unconscious, in short ‘fantasies’. Both of these entities, it will be argued, can be viewed as psychological and social defences uniquely attuned to some of the challenges that contemporary societies place on individuals, and, as all defences, they create anxieties and inhibitions of their own. The essay will indicate some of the ways in which a psychoanalytic perspective contributes to a deeper understanding of some of the illusions and discontents that are coextensive with a consumerist society.

The concept of identity and various struggles that surround it is well attuned to the temporary, fluid and porous qualities of our times (Coupland and Brown, 2004). Many organizations today seem to make ambiguous or contradictory demands on their employees, which are well catered for by the concept of identity (Alvesson, 2001). On the one hand, for example, they frequently demand that employees go beyond the mere execution of their task by embracing their values, brand and narratives – in short, they expect employees to identify with them (as though they were religion or ethnic groupings). On the other hand, they steadfastly refuse to offer their employees the security and permanence of stable employment, by constantly looking for opportunities to downsize, to outsource and to offshore. The project of identity describes well the plight of the individual who is frequently on the move, who is often called to reinvent himself/herself, the individual who is free from an obligation of lifelong loyalty to an employer but who is expected to fully identify with such an employer for indeterminate periods of time (Gabriel, 2005). The concept also serves well those interested in the ways that contemporary capitalism creates disciplined and self-disciplined employees who, in seeking to maintain their identities, go beyond the call of duty (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006; Clarke et al., 2009).

If identity, as a concept, has served well scholars of organizations, it has proven manna from heaven to theorists of today’s consumer culture, where every consumer desire, whim or impulse

can be readily viewed as a part of a self-striving towards identity. The view that material objects are parts of a human extended self has a long and distinguished pedigree – for example, William James (1961 [1892]: 44) noted that a man's 'me' is made up of everything that he can call his, including 'his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses and yacht and bank-account'. The psychoanalyst Winnicott (1964) noted how, in early childhood, children form intense attachments to certain objects, like Teddy bears or pieces of soft rag. These objects, which he called 'transitional objects', lie halfway between the infant's inner and outer realities, providing bridges between the internal and external worlds. Transitional objects are instrumental in the child's development and may be replaced later by other objects that have the same bridging function. Today's consumers, however, need not create deep emotional attachments to objects that become part of their identities. A wide range of unexceptional objects are not so much carriers of meaning, as carriers of vivid and powerful *images*, enabling them to choose them consciously or unconsciously among many options, promising to act as the raw material out of which individual identities may be fashioned. Unlike children who form attachments to their cuddly toys, Western consumers do not establish profound relationships with the majority of the goods they consume. Instead, they choose them, use them (singly or in combinations) and discard them in opportunistic but highly visible ways, being very conscious of the inferences which others will draw from them, and by the ways their image will be affected by them.

Choice then is the bedrock of contemporary identity projects. A wide range of issues that previous generations viewed as matters of birth, fate and social rank now become areas of choice. These include choice of goods to consume, choice of occupation, choice of partner, choice of sexual preference but also choice of gender, choice of body shape and even choice when to end one's life. These choices have opened up new possibilities of identity construction but also created new burdens. The material culture both supports and undermines efforts to create and maintain identities. On the one hand, many branded and unbranded goods become, at least temporarily, parts of an extended self, at least temporarily boosting identity, self-image and self-esteem. In this sense, consumer culture is tailor-made for the narcissistic strivings of contemporary society. But choice also creates burdens and anxieties. Have we made the right choices? Have we missed out on hidden possibilities? Can our choices be reversed, if they prove unsuccessful?

Numerous commentators (Bauman, 1988; Sennett, 1998) have offered convincing arguments that an unprecedented degree of freedom has opened up for people, at least those living in industrialized countries of the West. This freedom finds its epitome in the ability to choose what to buy and consume and comes to dominate many aspects of life, including politics, education, health, occupation and lifestyle, since in a consumerist society, many choices are modelled on consumer choices, and many choices, no matter how trivial, become existential choices – that is, identity- and self-defining choices. For the sake of this freedom, people are willing to endure high levels of insecurity and frustration. This concept of freedom is the fruit of the neo-liberal economic doctrine that emphasizes free markets, free trade and private property. It is quite distinct from other conceptions of freedom, such as theological and philosophical discourses of free will, political conceptions of freedoms of speech, association, self-determination and so forth and the intellectual value of freedom of inquiry, all of which have tended to be marginalized in public discourses, under the dominance of the neo-liberal consumerist concept – the choice among alternatives in little-regulated markets.

Let us now consider the possibility that this concept of freedom (that underlies many others) is an illusion and that choice and identity are derivative illusions. The word illusion is used here in a technical sense (Freud, 1927; Gabriel, 1983) to denote a deeply held and taken-for-granted belief that acts as the basis for numerous meaningful practices, a belief that is not susceptible to correction by appeal to reason

or factual evidence but is sustained by a web of desires and defends against a web of anxieties. Illusion (or its political counterpart ideology) lies at the heart of Freud's but also of Marx's critique of religion. What I want to consider here is the possibility that the consumerist conception of freedom, with its allied notions of choice and identity, are functioning in exactly the same way as religion (and its allied ideas of God, the afterlife and so forth), as Marx described it in the famous passage 'religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the "opium" of the people' (Marx, 1972 [1843]: 12).

Let us then consider the possibility that freedom, as presented in consumer choices under the pressing project of identity, is today's opium of the people. Several things fall immediately in place. First, like religion, consumer freedom has a disciplining and controlling function, as Bauman (1992) and others have pointed out. Enjoying freedom means taking responsibility for one's choices and falling into line with them. Those living on state benefits are viewed as having forfeited this freedom (they are failed consumers, in Bauman's terms) and act as a disciplining force for those who believe that they still have choices, no matter how unpleasant. Second, like religion, consumer freedom has a therapeutic function, compensating for various other misfortunes and reversals. We may not enjoy what we have, but at least we console ourselves with the belief that we have choices and that one day we too may enjoy the happiness brought about by consumerism. Consumption becomes a therapy (Rieff, 1966), compensating us when things go wrong, rewarding us when things go well and, like opium, always creating dependency. Third, like many religious and nationalist illusions, consumer freedom fulfils a narcissistic function, offering us opportunities to enhance our self-image and raise us above those around us. This is an argument explored in depth by Lasch (1980), who argued that consumerism does not merely promote narcissism but is virtually coextensive with it and by Bourdieu (1984) who saw consumer choice as a means of accumulating symbolic capital and setting oneself above others. If the therapeutic function of freedom is attained by exercising it, its narcissistic function is attained by exercising it in a *discriminating* manner. It is not surprising that the psychoanalytic concept of narcissism has proven so valuable in discussions of contemporary consumption (Gabriel and Lang, 2006). Consumerist ideologies appeal to people's narcissistic desires, offering to enhance their image and attractiveness through a wide range of beautifying accoutrements. Narcissism has also shed insights into the aggressive and sadistic qualities of contemporary consumption (Cluley and Dunne, 2012), which can remain oblivious to its damaging social and environmental implications, even when it takes the moral high ground of equality, fairness and sustainability.

If freedom, choice and identity are indeed core illusions of our consumerist society, psychoanalytically they must be seen as elements of a fantasy that seeks to reconcile desire and the forces that oppose it. Arguing always by analogy to the psychoanalytic theory of religion, just as the belief in an omnipotent and omniscient male deity expresses the desire for protection by a father-like figure, fantasies revolving around freedom, choice and identity must be seeking to give voice to a deeper set of desires. A possible answer here is the desire to be or to appear to be in control of one's life. 'I am free to make my own choices; I take full responsibility for the consequences'. Such an explanation would suggest that the illusion of freedom seeks to compensate for the sense of precariousness and insecurity that pervade late modernity (Gabriel, 2005). As such, the illusion of freedom would be highly ineffective and unlikely. If anything, freedom is a compensation for the felt *lack of control*, the precarious qualities of life ('If I cannot be in control, at least I have choices'). Control was a major modernist desire and called for modernist illusions. If earlier generations sought to escape freedom (Fromm, 1966 [1941]) opting for the security of protective or even authoritarian systems, ours is a time when consumerism has raised individual autonomy and

distinctness ('finding one's own voice') above all other values, viewing them as a fundamental right of every person, even at the cost of insecurity and anxiety.

It seems to me that the fundamental desire behind the illusion of freedom is the desire to be *unique* and *special*; correspondingly, the paramount anxiety from which choice defends us is the almost unbearable notion that we are *just* like everyone else. Choice is the foundation of identity. *Remove identity and choice becomes empty, remove choice and identity is reduced to destiny* – I was born to people I didn't choose, at a time I didn't choose, in a place I didn't choose, in a social class, an ethnic group and many other groups I didn't choose, in a body I didn't choose, with a mind I didn't choose and even in a species I didn't choose. Enter choice and identity is magically transformed: I can be who I choose to be, I choose the career I want, the body I want, the sexuality I want, the friends I want, the clothes I want and so forth. Without choice, identity itself loses its controlling, its therapeutic and its narcissistic qualities.

Freedom, choice and identity can then be viewed as intertwined illusions, analogous to religion, God and the afterlife. As such, we defend them, but they defend us. We defend our identity from disruptions and assaults. But our identity also defends us – from other people and also from own fears and insecurities. Identity is both something that we defend and something that we use as a defence against other threats. It is a *conscious* construction that covers a variety of unconscious wishes, and hence Freud was right in the opening excerpt to refer to the *many obscure emotional forces* that support it. We do not dream identity. It is only in our waking hours that we 'struggle' over it. If identity and choice defend us against various anxieties by proclaiming our specialness, they automatically spawn secondary anxieties of their own, just as all psychological defences do. Are we making the right choices? Can we defend our identity?

The defence of specialness has been singled out as a major psychological mechanism by Irving Yalom on the basis of his long experience of treating cancer and other seriously ill patients. Prompted by an inspiring observation from Tolstoy (2012), Yalom notes that:

we all know that in the basic boundaries of existence we are no different from others. No one denies that at a conscious level. Yet deep, deep down each of us believes . . . that the rule of mortality applies to others but certainly not to ourselves. (Yalom and Yalom, 1998: 210)

Thus, many of his patients acknowledge a harsh reality 'out there', which rules everybody else but not themselves. In their imagination, these patients imagine that illness, suffering and death are for everybody else but not for themselves. They imagine themselves to be different, protected as it were by an invisible shield that keeps them out of harm's way. Could it be then that this shield is precisely what we call *identity*? Could it be that identity is not something deep and primary but something superficial and derivative on which consumerist culture has built its edifice?

If nothing else, this would at least explain why many generations of humans managed their lives quite well, individually and collectively, without requiring this notion. It would also explain why every great social theorist before the 1940s could very well theorize without recourse to identity. If identity is indeed a superficial, though vital, construction, it may well be that our theories of consumption should start probing more deeply into those 'obscure emotional forces' that support it, rather than the tangible material objects and experiences that become its temporary and opportunistic carriers.

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