

Rethinking Marx: Demystifying the Nomos of Filipino Consumerism as Conditioned by Capitalism

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abstract

This paper is an attempt to expose the underlying forces which shaped Filipino consumerism at present. It becomes evident that the postmodern world has engendered strong support to the development of the forces of production. It even creates a crucial turning point in the manner the members of society change their priorities of consumption from necessity to luxury. The 21st century has pushed our society towards the creation of the consumerist environment. After the frantic circulation of capital which eventually landed in concentration on the hands of the few Filipino economic elites, our society's drive for consumption was set in motion. In essence, this is a genuine reflection of Marx's belief on the manner the productive forces manipulate the desires and interests of their subjects- the consumers. The ideas of Karl Marx have never been more relevant than they are today. Looking at the present state of Filipino consumerism, it is the exact scenario prophesized by Marx in his writings regarding capitalism and its preservation of the economic order. The plight of consumerism is dictated by the power of the capitalist which in effect, controls different modes of exchange in our society. As such, it is a crisis which creates a thirst for a Marxist theory in our attempt to analyze the problem from its very core. The dominating power of the capitalist becomes more visible in its capacity to manipulate the mentality and desires of the members of the consumerist society. It creates an infatuating technique which engenders "false needs" among consumers. This manipulation torments the very rationality of man. The dangerous spell it creates on the rationality lies in the



manner commodity is taken as seemingly possessing a magical power navigating all possible desires created by man in his interest for consumption. In effect, the society enters a mystical state as consumption is controlled by the capitalist system. This mystification of consumerism is subtle yet a potent technique used by the capitalist to exploit the consuming minds of the public. Thus, the real challenge faced by the Filipinos today is to move away from the manipulative power of the ruling economic elites and break the spell by forming a demystified state in one's consciousness.

keywords:

Capitalism, False Needs, Consumerism, Economic Elites, Mystification

Introduction

The world of change demands an extra strength from man to catch up with evolutionary processes and developments in the social context. The present situation in the Philippines is characterized by the need for an increasing skill for survival, especially in the manner the economic part of man's life becomes complex because of the diversity of offered products and services in the market. During the time of Karl Marx, he came to a prediction that a time will come when society would have to adapt its character from the ever changing economic forces. This calculation turned out to be a reality as it is enormously felt in the global setting today. Such evolution in the economic field is controlled by money, the most basic commodity necessary for exchange. If we are to establish the power that money gives to man, it is evident that possession of it makes one capable of controlling the mode of production and consumption. Thus, historically speaking, when the productive forces was stirred by the presence of money, it became the starting point of capitalist formation which was not only felt in the global setting but localized as well.

The power invested by money on commodity is reshaping the course of history of our nation at present. For instance, Filipino values are redefined, social interactions are becoming more complex, and the authentic value of the individual identity becomes blurry. We are all cognizant of the fact that evolutionary changes demand a skillful manner of survival which can be aided by the rationality of

man. In Darwinian sense, it demands for the creation of a coping mechanism strong enough to surpass the tide of uncertainty in the economic field. However, economic changes as dictated by the surge of capitalism and consumerism elevated its status on a higher ground, high enough that even the rationality of man can no longer surpass and control. Given this situation in our society where consumption becomes the norm, reason can no longer create protective armor due to the fact that the common ideology of the consumerist society demands for a blind conformity. It is likewise blatant that in the advent of capitalism, consumerism becomes the core of human existence. It is the source of identity, the defining factor which shapes the interpersonal, and also a manipulative force behind survival. This tide of consumerism eats the very value of life, what it demands is a passive acceptance of the new reality blowing away all strands of rationality. Thus, the consumerist culture becomes the prevailing theme of different nations in the global scheme creating a society characterized by apathy and misery.

The Filipino consumerist society at present mirrors the character of production prevalent in the land. There is a conjunction between production of unwanted goods and the demands shaped by the individuals' consuming life. We develop a consumerist society saturated by proliferated desires in which production was geared to consumption.¹ It is a simulated culture characterized by stylish promiscuity which downgraded our traditional values and belief system at large. This paved way to the invention of the new mass consumer culture which created a blow destroying our intellectual culture. In effect, the new power of consumerist culture legitimizes the hedonistic tendencies in the nascent mode of exchange of goods in our society which turn our people away from the true meaning of necessity.²

Consumerism in the 21st Century: A Movement from Subsistence to Subservient Economy

In an article written by Zygmunt Baumann (*Consuming Life*: 2001: 5), he mentioned that “all living creatures need consumption in

¹ Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, (2nd Edition, Sage Publications, 2007), 10.

² Ibid.

order to stay alive.”³ However, being human sets an additional task for one has the tendency to consume more than mere survival would demand. Being alive in the human way requires an additional demand which may go beyond mere biological existence and that is to be in conformity with elaborate social standards of decency and propriety in one’s intention to design a good life.⁴ Such social standards might have been rising over time, though in the past, life’s simplicity empowered man to have a good control in defining what is needed from what is not. For instance, the sum total of ‘consumables’ needed to gratify man was at each moment fixed: it had its lower as much as its upper limits. The limits were drawn by the tasks expected to be performed: before humans could perform them, they had to be fed, clothed and sheltered first, and all that in the ‘proper manner’. They had a fixed number of ‘which they had to ‘satisfy’ in order to survive. But consumption, being servant of needs, had to justify itself in terms of something other than itself. “Survival (biological and social) was the purpose of consumption, and once that purpose was met (the ‘needs’ had been satisfied) there was no point in consuming more.”⁵ This scenario led to the creation of needs beyond the biological and social aspects of one’s life. In this respect, consumption was set to be directed to a different angle. Thus, giving birth to the introduction of commodities intended to redefine the wants of every man.

It is not to be understood however that this demand for consumption was easily followed in a passive way. A resistance was built by the consuming public in the manner they also want to take control of the direction of their needs. In addition, part of the resistance is practicing temperance and moderation in one’s consuming life. According to Bauman, “falling below the standard of consumption was an ethical reproach to all the rest of society, but climbing above them was equally an ethical reproach to all the rest of society, though this time personal fault.”⁶ Indulging in the pleasures of the flesh, gluttony and intemperance were long frowned upon if not condemned as mortal sins in the past. It is also the line of argument taken by Thorstein Veblen who wrote at the threshold of the consumer age and made a massive attack on the leisure being

³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life*, (Journal of Consumer Culture, Sage Publications, 2001), 5.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

taken in commodity consumption. He lambasted the presence of ‘conspicuous’ or ‘ostentatious’ consumption which was highly visible in the urban areas by claiming that it is only “serving nothing but vainglory and self-conceit.”⁷

Eventually, the authors behind the promotion of the consumerist culture discovered an evasive tactic to move away from ethical constraints and criticism. For instance, Baumann mentioned in his research that the distinctive mark of the consumer society and its consumerist culture is not solely dedicated to consumption as such; not even the elevated and fast rising volume of consumption. “What sets the members of consumption from its past instrumentality that used to draw limits- the demise of ‘norms’ and the new plasticity of ‘needs’, setting consumption free from functional bonds.”⁸ As needs proliferates from different angles in man’s consuming life, societal norms as it seems, even become the very instrument in legitimizing the culture of production and consumption. In every society, one can easily observe that people are easily swayed by their desire to buy and consume beyond what they truly need.

In order to understand the nature of consumption at present, there is a need to revisit the past character of the means of production. The early 19th and 20th century responded to the call of man’s need for survival by providing the necessities dedicated only to everyday subsistence. At that time, the technology used in production was not yet at the cutting-edge, thus making it hard to meet everyone’s basic needs. The challenge faced by the people of that era, our great-grandparents, is on how to produce as many goods as possible as quickly and efficiently in order to sustain the needs of the social sphere. Despite the limit in production though, they learn to see themselves as rational minds, humans who were active in producing what they need and managed to design the world in front of them to fit their survival. In Theodore Roszak’s thinking, this rationality represents the manipulation of the “In-Here” to whatever is given “Out-There”. It is in the manipulation of the “In-Here”

⁷ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, (The McMillan Company, New York), 46.

⁸ Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 17.

which makes the “Out-There” systematically in line with its improvement.⁹

As the economy shifted from subsistence to a capitalist system, it gave birth to the consumerist society. In the consumer society of the middle and late 20th century, we are no longer needed as producers of goods and services. With the availability of technology, machines can do almost everything without us. Nevertheless, to keep the system going, we are badly needed as consumers of goods. Production of goods is energized by the presence of its buyers. In order to make it alive, we must keep buying. Given this kind of concrete reality, we experience the world “out-there” not as a raw material to be shaped by our rationality and skills but as items to be purchased. In return, we experience ourselves “in-here” not as rational and skillful manipulators but as passive consumers, who are often impulsive rather than rational.¹⁰

Characterization of the present mode of consumption is also being highlighted by Herbert Marcuse in his attempt to describe the mentality of the entire society towards the creation of different needs. It is evident in Marcuse’s theory that the creation of false needs is being deliberately done as a mechanism of control from the owners of production as a way of protecting their investment in the economic order. According to him, until the present century most human labor was directed toward meeting basic needs. Goods and services were valued because they were useful; they could help meet basic needs (economists call this use-value following the line of thought of Marx).¹¹ But the middle part of 20th century has launched the greatest revolution in the history of humanity: our technology now allows us to meet all the basic needs of all the people in the world with very little labor. Marcuse thinks this is true no matter how much the population grows. Indeed if everyone worked at producing goods to meet basic needs, there would be far too many of these goods. This would drive the price way down, and no one could make a profit. So to keep the capitalist system going, most work must be done for socially created needs that have little to do with basic human needs. In other words, most work must be done

⁹ Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter-Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*, (University of California Press, 1995), 224-225.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, (Beacon Press Boston, 1970), 4.

to meet “false needs”.¹² These needs are shaped simply as products of socially created needs. They intensify the satisfaction and even the character of human needs beyond the biological level. As such, human needs are now preconditioned and seized by the prevailing societal institutions and interests, the satisfaction of which is subject to overriding critical standard.¹³

According to Marcuse, “false needs are those which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which propagate negative values and experience i.e. hardship, hostility and discrimination among others”.¹⁴ Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and to consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category. Most importantly for Marcuse, “the rewards of the system are handed out very unfairly.”¹⁵

Looking at the world as a whole, a few people get huge amounts of money, power, and other resources. But most get virtually nothing. They live their lives in relative poverty, often a squalid grinding poverty. So the system perpetuates toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice---all of which are unnecessary.¹⁶

In this respect, it is evident that a shift in orientation from subsistence to subservient mode of consumption is a trap of misfortune veiled by the promise of shallow hedonism when we buy things offered to us in the market. Despite our claim that the present moment is characterized by advancements and speed of recovery from our underdeveloped past, it is noteworthy to the very least to face the sad truth that our great-grandparents worked in order to gain mastery over nature. The mode of consumption of the past is controlled by the rationale of man, a controlled psyche that makes him the determining force in shaping the given reality in front of him. The present mode of consumption is characterized by passivity of reason; the consumerist behavior is subservient to what is given. We work in order to be able to consume. This indispensable desire to consume shapes our very character and behavior. It even dictates

¹² Ibid., 5.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

our behavior for we learn to work within the system, although most of the time the work it provides is repetitive, boring, and useless. The same sentiment was being highlighted by Marcuse when he mentioned that “the social controls exact the overwhelming need for the production and consumption of waste; the need for stupefying work where it is no longer a real necessity; the need to modes of relaxation which soothe and prolong this stupefication”.¹⁷

The sad truth is we do not really pay attention to the shackles that consumption has created for us. Goods and services that meet “false needs” are valued simply because they have a high price tag, which usually, has nothing to do with their use-value. We are willing to pay a lot for them only because everyone else is willing to pay a lot as well. This reality captures the present state of the Filipino consumerist behavior. It is indeed a movement from subsistence to subservient economy. It is likewise a shift in orientation where the rationality of man is no longer needed in the manner he responds to social pressures imposed upon him by the consumerist society. What makes it worst is the institutionalization of socially created needs as further legitimized by mass media, social media, and other sources determining the entire course of consumption of the Filipinos at present.

The ‘Nomos’ of Filipino Consumerism

The word consumerism has two meanings; at one point it means the protection of consumer interests but on the other hand, it is more commonly taken as the doctrine of people’s consumption of goods and services. It is the latter import which will determine the entire course of analysis in this study as a tool for exposition of the true nature of consumerism in our society today. A closer look at the behavior of consumerism in our place will bring us to the realization that people are often influenced by variety of sources. Despite our attempts not to be overly controlled by them, we commonly embrace its power for we believe that consumption is in our best interests. We constantly become active players in a consumerist environment because our mentality is shaped by the belief that it will in some way, long or short term, make our lives better. Consumerism is such a key element of our world today; it is something we cannot help but be part of. Despite the availability of reading materials written as an

¹⁷ Ibid., 7.

attack to consumerism such as pollution, bad health, and poor working conditions, the society's rationality is being hijacked by a counter campaign of the profiteers to reinforce the consumerist society.¹⁸

The Greek word 'nomos' representing a law or custom as used by Plato in his early writings can best describe the state of affairs of Filipino consumerism today. The sophist Anthipon for instance believed that "human beings cannot decide on their own for they have to follow rules and conventions. Actions are predetermined by set of standards on what ends a particular human being should or should not pursue."¹⁹ In this regard, all beliefs about what people should do are products of nomos. In a consumerist society, we internalize the powerful 'nomos' of consumerism and blindly mold our identity upon it. We experience ourselves, above all, as consumers. We define our characters in terms of what we consume and put an extra pressure on the need to exhibit a power in consuming. As a matter of fact, there is a conscious effort on the part of the promoters of consumerism to train our mentality at an early stage in shaping our desire towards patronizing all those unnecessary consumer items available in our environment i.e. a child weeps for he demands an item displayed in malls, an adult becomes restless at night for he needs to satisfy his desire to buy a product offered in the market, a woman shaped her femininity as to what is dictated by the mass media and the list is endless. Our belief system has been twisted, our desires has been reshaped by consumerism. As an obvious reality, the apparatus of control has been developed by the masters in the consumerist society. They managed to create an easy access to almost all consumer products that an individual might need vis-à-vis convenience stores, shopping malls, online markets and other means of response to the public demands for goods and services. Just by simply observing what is happening around us, Filipinos at present can be easily deceived by the new social reality as imposed by the trend in the present society. Whatever is in for instance as fads and crazes would dictate, it also means consumption. Likewise, the reason why we spend a lot on unnecessary things because we come to believe that we need everything that is being offered in the market or shopping malls. Our sense of individual

¹⁸ Roger Swagler, *Modern Consumerism*, (Encyclopedia of the Consumer Movement, Santa Barbara, California, 1997), 172-173.

¹⁹ David J. Riesbeck, *Nature, Normativity, and Nomos in Anthipon*, Volume 65, No. 3/4", (Published by Classical Association of Canada Stable, 2011), 275.

identity is shaped by these socially created needs. As Marcuse observed:

This civilization transforms the object world into an extension of man's mind and body...The people recognize themselves in their commodities. They find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment.²⁰

Our sense of identity is shaped by our capacity to consume. We are confronted by this sad reality that consumerism feeds its very soul from the irrationality of the consuming public. This customized irrationality proliferates in human behavior turning itself into an apparatus of control in the manner one faced his immediate realities. According to Marcuse, this irrationality represents a false consciousness. But this "false consciousness" of man's rationality turned out to be the prevailing true consciousness²¹ of the entire society under the tactical guise of capitalism. Accordingly, "the rationality of consumer society is built on the irrationality of its individualized actors".²² In addition, with man's uncontrollable desire to consume, he keeps doing unneeded work so that he can earn money to buy unnecessary goods and services too. Analyzing the present behavior of Filipino consumerist society, this becomes the very essence of our 'nomos' today which created in turn a cycle of useless labor and consumption. Marx is right after all, that capitalism is a blood sucker--it sucks the blood coming out from the irrational passions of man.

Mystified Consumerism in the Guise of Commodity Fetishism

An investigation on the capitalist mode of production must start with an analysis on commodity as a single unit of exchange. Marx described the character of the capitalist society as an "immense accumulation of commodities".²³ "A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties which satisfies

²⁰ Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

²² Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 17.

²³ Frederick Engels, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Vol. 1*, Trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Progress Publishers, Moscow, USSR, 1887), 26.

human wants of some sort or another”.²⁴ The nature of human wants, according to Marx, whether they spring from stomach or from fancy makes no difference at all.²⁵ It is simply because under the capitalist economy, the focus of the owners of production is to maintain the phenomenon of exchange. Commodity existed before capitalism; however, it was given its intrinsic value in the manner of exchange. For instance, in feudal or slave societies, a person would usually exchange a commodity to obtain something that he truly needed for survival. The value of money, if ever it was used, was simply an intermediate stage of the process.²⁶ However, when capitalism entered the social sphere during Marx days, commodity production dominated the economy, a scenario that did not exist in the pre-capitalist society. Marx’s date for the beginning of capitalism was the last third of the eighteenth century, a time when industrial development led to the factory system of manufacture.²⁷

In a capitalist economy, social relations are effected only in the exchange of products. The social character of labor is hidden for the dominant theme is putting a value of exchange on the available commodities, and this in turn, gave birth to the fetish character of the latter. Marx believed that “under capitalism people experience social relations as value relations between things”.²⁸ This is the illusion of fetishism- “value appears as a natural attribute of commodities” excluding the reality of interaction among men. To summarize, while value (in its true sense) must be taken as a relation between people, it is expressed as a relation between things, and it is through exchange of commodities that relations between people in their place remain hidden.

In primitive societies, inanimate objects are sometimes thought to have supernatural powers i.e. voodoo dolls or holy statues. This belief changed in sophisticated manner when the capitalist society evolved because of the given new set of reality. People suffer from the illusion that inanimate money or commodities have powers and properties on their own, thus, giving birth to the commodity’s fetish character. In effect, “a fetish is an object of desire, worship or

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Gill Hands, *Marx: The Key Ideas*, (Published by McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 2010), 71.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 94.

obsessive concern.”²⁹ In this sense, Marx begins his discussion on fetishism of commodities by inferring that although a commodity initially appears a trivial thing; further analysis reveals it as very strange, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. However, so far as it is a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it is capable of satisfying human wants, or from the point that those properties are the product of human labor.³⁰ Given this scenario, the enigmatical character of a commodity arises:

Simply because in it the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour.³¹

The fetish character of commodity which was also being described by Marx as “mystic character” originated in the peculiar social attributes of labour.³³ In this sense, the fetish originates from the process of production. When production is being undertaken in the capitalist system, it is privately organized by atomized producers. It does entail a conflict between *sociality* and *asociality* as further strengthened through the process of commodity exchange.³⁴ Putting it into context, the *sociality* represents the relation existing between the producers and the forces of production i.e. labourers, but its *asociality* is seen in the realization that this relation is not directly established between persons (in the process of production) but through exchange of products or commodities. Thus, the commodity relation entails circularity. Capitalist social relations have become reified in commodities, which in turn come to act as a regulative force over society. The mystery or the fetish character of commodity

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Frederick Engels, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Vol. 1*, Trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Progress Publishers, Moscow, USSR, 1887), 46.

³¹ Ibid.

³³ Hans G. Erhbar, *Annotations to Karl Marx Capital*, 469.

³⁴ Guido Schulz, *Marx Distinction Between the Fetish Character of Commodity and Fetishism*, (University of Sussex), 5.

describes this external social force that commodities come to be by virtue of their autonomisation:³⁵

What is mysterious about the commodity form is therefore simply that the social characteristics of men's own labour are reflected back to them as objective characteristics inherent in the products of their labour, as quasi-physical properties of these things, and that therefore also the social relation of the producers to the aggregate labour is reflected as a social relation of objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. Through this quid pro quo, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time extrasensory or social.³⁶

The same tone of argumentation was used by Chris Wyatt (Defetishized Society 2011) when he mentioned that in Marx days, the verb “to fetishize referred to the tendency to worship an inanimate object due to its supposedly mystical and magical power.”³⁷ Marx manner of interpreting this underlies an obscure character of the commodity that once being introduced to the market, it possesses illusionary and seemingly natural qualities that can relocate and displace our social relations. Commodities are being granted autonomy to be regarded as subjects, personified in a given extent. It is in this personification of the inanimate which gives control at the end to social relations. In this context, objects in the form of commodities are now treated as subjects, thus, the illusionary and mystical character of commodities gives birth to mystification of fetishism.

The contemporary capitalist society, according to Wyatt, still confronts the very same serious problems faced by Marx in his conceptualization of the capitalist scheme of reality. The media for one, as an instrument of commercialization weave all forms of persuasion and control in order to portray how commodities are possessing magical powers:

this razor attracts a beautiful woman, this perfume allures the man of your dreams, this slick car confirms the composure of

³⁵ Erhbar, *Annotations to Karl Marx: Capital*, 457-458.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 451-452

³⁷ Chris Wyatt, *The Defetishized Society: New Economic Democracy as a Libertarian Alternative to Capitalism*, (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 1.

the driver; the list is endless. It is not only that capitalism permits the fetishism of commodities; it is, rather, that fetishism is actually indispensable to it. Capitalism is not just an economic system that is profit based; it commands the maximization of profit.³⁸

The key aspect of commodity fetishism is that it deliberately focuses attention on exchange relations for once the products of labor entered the market, individuals bestow onto commodities their personal relations. With such tendency of the consumers to depersonalized interactions and impart on commodities their social bonds through exchange, the capitalists are now encouraged to expand and multiply their needs. Understanding Marx leads me to conclude that the capitalists' vis-à-vis their power to produce all forms of instrumentalities is shaping and dictating our needs. As such, social needs are posited as necessary because the capitalists say so. In effect, under the spell of capitalism, social needs are no longer on the side of the most necessary ones, rather, they become part of the contingent aspect of one's desire powerful enough that it really calls for its satisfaction. So, nothing is remote from Marx claims during his days that capitalism engenders 'false needs' arising from one's social existence as conditioned by the values imposed by capitalism. These values include possession of property, wealth, money, and social status among others. The origin of "false needs" is deliberately being introduced by the capitalist in the advent of commercialization which has reached its peak in the early part of 21st century paving way to the creation of consumerist culture in the global scheme.

Misology: The Present Plight of Filipino Consumerism

Misology is a term I borrowed from Immanuel Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. He suggested that "people who cultivate reason and consecrate themselves to the pleasures of life and happiness begin to suffer from *misology*, the closest interpretation of which is hatred of reason. This is because according to Kant, they seem to discover that all the time they spent thinking, reasoning and arguing condemned them to isolation (of pleasures) causing, thus, more fatigue than enjoyment."³⁹ Kant also

³⁸ Ibid., 3.

³⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals on a Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns*, (Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., USA), 8.

suggests that once misology sets in, thinkers begin to envy those whom (the philosopher classifies as being “of inferior condition”) do not allow reason to influence their actions. It is suggesting that once humans purge reason and give in to their sensation, they accept the reality of the outside world with joy, thus it means being one with life. This attitude of giving in to sensational demands and embracing misology is a resemblance of consumerism in a mystified state as Marx suggested that it is a condition where happiness is bestowed on the reality of an outside entity like that of commodity.

The first characterization of misology is seen on the creation of the vicious cycle of work and consumption. It is a reality at present faced by the Filipino society and it is best captured on how Marcuse characterized the 21st century as dominantly controlled by consumerism. Our positive self-image depends in an endless round of buying; our shallow hedonism defines our very essence at its core. The consumerist behavior represents a “vicious cycle of work-and-spend- just like a fast-spinning wheel in which consumption must be paid for by long hours of work – which need to be rewarded by more consumption, and so on.”⁴⁰ Fueled by advertising and social pressures, expectations tend to rise with income, but satisfaction does not. Thus, they say that “there is always an element of dissatisfaction which increased income cannot cure”.⁴¹ This dissatisfaction is something that reason cannot totally comprehend. For instance, a study conducted by Carley and Spapens conclude that:

It is no accident: workers who are earning a lot of money because they work long hours provide the market for the very goods they are producing, and never mind if they do not really need the goods in question. The consumption becomes the reward for the hard work and the long hours.⁴²

Another reflection of misology in our society can be seen on how the family as an important institution in our society is also being shaped by consumerism. In a study made by Gerry Lanuza focusing on Filipino Sociology, he mentioned that “as the Philippines rides the vehicle of modernity, there is also a phenomenal dispersal of

⁴⁰ Carley, M. and Spapens, P., *Sharing the World: Sustainable Living and Global Equity in the 21st Century*, (Earthscan, London, 1998), 143.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

Filipinos worldwide through migration.”⁴³ This in turn creates an impact in reshaping the dominant values in Filipino families. It is an obvious reality that the main reason behind migration would be an attempt to mobilize the family income and put an improvement on the social status. In their realization of such dream, they just do not want this mobility to be manifested in simple means; they want to show it. And by showing it, it means to concretize this manifestation of success by purchasing material goods i.e. latest gadgets, designer clothes, building a big house, acquiring a car or even travelling in different places. It is similar to being ‘in the swim’, the tendency to go with the flow with the latest fads and crazes. Not being ‘in’ is taken by many as a moral lapse, a defeat in one’s purpose to succeed in life. This ‘seemingly’ high incident of Filipinos migrating abroad as domestic workers gives birth to a material culture. Parental absenteeism is in part being rectified by materiality; parents would justify their absence with the noble intention of providing for the basic needs of family members. As such, it stimulates the creation of the consumerist culture for one way of covering up for one’s shortcoming would be buying material things for the family members. Notwithstanding the actual labor condition in other countries, what matters to the migrant workers is the hope in mind that they will earn big time so that they can buy the needs of the loved ones they left behind. More promising is the exchange value of money; even family members of these migrant workers are at times blinded by materiality and consumption. The quality of family relations is being measured now by consumerism; happiness is stirred by the presence of material things. In this sense, there is a threat of decay in the quality of interaction among family members for the authenticity of relationship could possibly be ruined by the consumerist attitude. For instance, they are no longer concern with the actual situations of the migrant workers i.e. the person’s safety, working condition, and emotional trauma that one has to go through while being away from the family. Instead of showing concerns, what is dominant in air during their conversation on social media would be an endless reminder of the consumer goods that they want to have i.e. shoes, clothes, gadgets, chocolates, and most importantly money. In addition, one particular example of the consumerist attitude is the “balik-bayan box”, a seeming must-have for every consumerist

⁴³ Gerry M. Lanuza, *Towards a Relevant Filipino Sociology in the Age of Globalization and Postmodernity*, (Published by: University of San Carlos, 2003), 242.

Filipino family. In a study conducted by UNICEF, it is conclusive that absentee parents possibly promote a culture of consumerism:

Most children accept the migration of their parents as an opportunity to have a better life, they only see the “money equivalent” of migration. As long as they receive their money regularly, they will be fine. This also leads to a materialistic attitude of children of migrants.⁴⁴

Families are forced by this pursuit to live beyond their means and they blindly prioritize the luxuries over the necessary. The symbol of love is consumer goods. The owners of production in this aspect really like to stir up the materialist stance of the consumerist families since these are the patrons of their products. The depiction of a “happy” family in media is associated with consumer goods. Thus, our families are drawn into consumerism and further into poverty.

Given the above scenarios of how consumerism stunted the rationality of the members of our society, the present plight of consumerism in the Philippines is characterized by a “fetish character” that Marx had engendered in some of his writing regarding the economic structure of production. Looking at the entire environment, there is a strand of consumerism from the simplest unit of exchange to the more complex ones. Our society, because of its consumerist character became a reservoir of different types of surplus products. Almost everything is made available in a market-driven society. Ours is a place where luxury has magically shifted into a ‘seeming necessity’.

In an article written by Ira Chernus, it was mentioned that we internalize socially created needs; we not only have those needs in mind but feel them in our bodies. We physically crave the latest faddish foods, or massages, or fast cars. We get an erotic satisfaction from color TV images and beautiful restaurants.⁴⁵ Only the consumption system and its apparatuses can meet these needs. The mysticism also lies in the manner of persuasion being popularized by

⁴⁴ Melanie M. Reyes, *Migration and Filipino Children Left-Behind: A Literature Review*, (Miriam College – Women and Gender Institute, for the United Nations Children’s Fund -UNICEF, 2007), 11.

⁴⁵Ira Chernus, *Herbert Marcuse: A Critique of Consumerist Society*, Retrieved from University of Colorado at Boulder website, (<http://www.colorado.edu/religiousstudies/chernus/sixties/herbert%20marcuse.pdf>), 81-82. Accessed March 20, 2015.

media in our present state. This is how we can best characterize the Filipino society, and it was also being captured in one of the researches done by E. San Juan Jr. when he mentioned that:

Without the prosperous development of the material resources and political instrumentalities, a Filipino cultural identity can only be artificial, hybrid fabrication of the elite—an excrescence of global consumerism, a symptom of the power of transnationalized commodity-fetishism that, right now, dominates the popular consciousness via the mass media, in particular television, films, music, food and fashion styles, packaged lifestyle that permeate the everyday practices of ordinary Filipinos across class, ethnicities, age and localities.⁴⁶

In addition, San Juan mentioned that “the consumerist habitus (to use Pierre Bourdieu’s concept) acquired from decades of colonial education and indoctrination has almost entirely conquered and occupied the psyche of every Filipino, except for those consciously aware of it and collectively resisting it.”⁴⁷ He also added that in our time today, this trend of consumerism “serves as a useful adjunct for enhancing the fetishistic magic, aura and seductive lure of commodities—from brand-name luxury goods to the whole world of images, sounds, theoretical discourses, and multimedia confections manufactured by the transnational culture industry and marketed as symbolic capital for the petty bourgeoisie of the periphery and other subalternized sectors within the metropole.”⁴⁸ In commercial ads, products of all kinds are offered with persuasive tag lines and display of power possessed by a given commodity. This in turn creates the mystic character of the products being endorsed in the market. It is also a manipulative technique and the target of which is the sentiments and ego of the members of the consumerist society.

Another aspect of man which became an obvious target of consumerism is the appetite. Filipinos are generally food lovers, as such the abdomen is the source of weakness for most of us. In this case, one of the strategies promoted by the consumerist society is to create restaurants offering unlimited consumption. For instance,

⁴⁶ E. San Juan Jr., *Sneaking Into the Philippines, Along the Rivers of Babylon: An Intervention Into the Language Question*, (Published by Ateneo de Manila, 2008), 69.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

restaurants are designed with “eat-all-you-can” banner, combo meals, and other choices are made available to satisfy the demands of the appetite. However, not all of the things included in the ingredients of the food menu are necessarily safe and healthy in category. But the possible danger of consuming artificial ingredients which are detrimental to one’s health as part of the food menu is not being minded by the blind consumers.

Technology also added an extra strength in the marketing strategy of the owners of production. It adds sophistication on the manner advertisements is being shown today making consumption more eye-catching than ever. The latest gadgets, fashion and other goods easily penetrate the psyche of desire of the consuming public. It is as though owning them becomes the very goal of existence for it adds an air of prestige to the possessor of the goods. The owners of production also develop a subtle seduction to the consuming public with their famous tag lines- “what are you waiting for”, “there is more to life”, and “open your minds to the world of wonders” etc. The success of consumerism is therefore defined by the very attitude of the consuming public. Their blindness and irrationality made it easy for the owners of production to make them an easy prey of the profit makers. This is misology to its very core.

Demystification as a Compromised Alternative to Gain Back Control over the Consuming Life

When Aristotle perceived virtue as being situated in the middle, it includes a proposal of moderation in the realization of our basic needs. This guideline offered in antiquity could still be of relevance in combating the power of consumerism at present times. It is because once moderation is being practiced by man, one can possibly create a personal apparatus of control to what is given. It is likewise an exercise of rationality, an attempt to move away from the manipulative power of the material world. However, the consumerist ideology says otherwise, it engenders cunning techniques in controlling the consciousness of man, the target of which is the stimulation of desire inside one’s nature. Thus, one of the best strategies used by capitalism in order to succeed in its operation is taking advantage of the weaknesses of our passions and emotions.

One possible solution to escape from this trance created by consumerism is to create a demystified state in one’s consciousness. Although it seems to be a hopeless endeavor at first, it is plausible

granting that the will is in line with reason. There is a need to be awakened from the mystified state, and this calls for a possibility of dialectics as it is required in this sense for man to question what is given. There seems to be a big shadow of impossibility to establish a defetishized society for man can no longer control all its economic activities. However, there is a wider road to recovery if man takes control of what is inside, besides- “self-determination is the negation of alienation”.⁴⁹ It is important to note that in demystified state, man’s consciousness is no longer mesmerized by what is given in the consumerist environment. As Marx reiterated, once man becomes a victim of his very own consuming life, man is always being controlled and seduced by the Capitalist spell.

Gaining control over one’s consuming life is a challenge which must be discovered by the reflective nature of the self. One’s reflection needs a realization that mystification is a mental manipulation created by the ruling class. It thrives in our personal desires and wants imposing a ‘seeming’ reality that our capacity of consuming gives way to a form of equality- that we can buy things the way the elites do. A certain layer of reality in this scenario is ignored that there is a discrepancy in the quality of consumption of the upper class and the lower class. For instance, Featherstone wrote that “new levels of luxury are evident at the top end of the social structure with a good deal of celebration of the lifestyle and consumption patterns of the rich. But for those below, who watch the celebrity and elite consumption in the media, their consumption is more of dreams, plus the occasional purchases of cheaper scaled-down luxuries”.⁵⁰ This is because regardless of the capacity to consume of those below the social stratum, they can never compete with the consuming power of the upper class. Social institutions also take advantage of the irrational behavior of the consuming public. In the present system for instance, the Filipino consumers are bombarded by financial institutions to sign up for easily accessible credit cards. It becomes a trend that both our government and individual consumers are encouraged to borrow excessively. As a result, our society suffers more because of its members being deluded by shallow hedonism brought about by consumerism. A plausible

⁴⁹ Chris Wyatt, *The Defetishized Society: New Economic Democracy as a Libertarian Alternative to Capitalism*, (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 14.

⁵⁰ Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, (2nd Edition, Sage Publications, 2007) 19-20.

solution lies on one's capacity for restraint. Abandoning our obsession for unnecessary possessions must become the central theme in our consuming life. Thus, it also means thorough contemplation must reign over consumption.

The offered solution above is taken as a compromised alternative to demystify our culture of consumption. It cries for the cooperation of the rationality to gain back control over the consuming life. This is high time to pull out the rationality of man from the consumerist bag. Certainly, demystification involves an abandonment of our obsessions towards material goods offered in our society. It is also a desire to win over the enchanter's wand of consumerism and become more vigilant in one's execution of the consuming life. As such, it needs a personal campaign to vanquish the spirit of consumerism and to move out from mysticism.

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