

Masking the Truth

It is central to the successful operation of capitalism's culture that the consumer be segregated or masked from the consequences of their lifestyle on the labourer and on the way of life of those whose degradation makes their life possible.

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Introduction

It is common to see protestors waving placards at film stars or other high-profile individuals wearing mink stoles and leather jackets. These protestors are attempting to bring to greater public attention that these ostentatious garments come at the demise of animal populations that may or may not yet be considered endangered. Other more mainstream media, such as the movie “Blood Diamond” with leading actors such as Leonardo DiCaprio, does a similar job, but this time in revealing the hidden expenses and deprivation of adult and child slave labour, with its heartless concern for their (not so) well-being. It appears to me that many examples of this form of protestation tend to wither away in the public’s memories, and life goes on regardless. We still buy fur coats and diamonds – or at least specific sectors of the public can. These examples are visual indicators of luxurious items that the few can obtain with an implicit disregard for how they were obtained. They may also be considered advertisements of what people could and should obtain if they wished to be like their heroes and heroines, again with similar procurement myopia displaying a capitalist culture of blindness to little else other than its obtainment. This discussion will briefly describe this culture of capitalism, the social effect the process has on the people (labourers) who assist in the transformation of raw materials into saleable products, and the all-to-often distancing of the consumer from the production process.

Capitalist Culture

Culture by itself can be described in many ways, but one anthropological definition, as derived from Fairchild (1967) and cited by Berger (2018), is “A collective name for all behavior patterns socially acquired and transmitted by means of symbols”. In turn, a definition of capitalism suggested by Jahan & Mahmud (2015) is:

Often thought of as an economic system in which private actors own and control property in accord with their interests, and demand and supply freely set prices in markets in a way that can serve the best interests of society (Jahan & Mahmud, 2015).

Together, these can be combined to offer a full definition of capitalist culture as, perhaps, “a behaviour pattern embedded in an economic system in which the efforts of private actors are principally to improve their interests through meeting a demand with the supply of products, with the implicit, but not necessarily to the full realisation of betterment to all society; that being a secondary issue.”

Perhaps this is somewhat cynical, but stating unequivocally that the actual intent to improve society through this pattern of behaviour is not always true; this is often realised more intensely by some of those employed in producing material supply or, indeed, some of those in receipt of same.

Nevertheless, this is a standard economic system that we are living with, and it is based on five elements as listed in Robbins (2005):

- Commodities (C). There are basically two types of commodities: capital goods and consumer goods. Capital goods, such as land, raw materials, tools, machines, and factories, are used to produce consumer goods (e.g., television sets, VCRs, computers, and houses) to be sold to others.
- Money (M). Money is, among other things, a standardized means of exchange, and it serves to reduce all goods and commodities to a standard value. By putting a monetary value on something (e.g., a forest), it can be compared with any other commodity (e.g., government bonds). Money, thus, greatly facilitates the exchange of commodities.
- Labor power (lp). Labor power is the work that is needed to transform one type of commodity into another (e.g., steel into an automobile).
- Means of production (mp). Another term for capital goods—that is the machines, land, and tools with which other commodities are produced.
- Production (P). The combination of lp and mp to produce commodities.

The cyclic nature of this capitalist process can also be visualised in Figure 1.

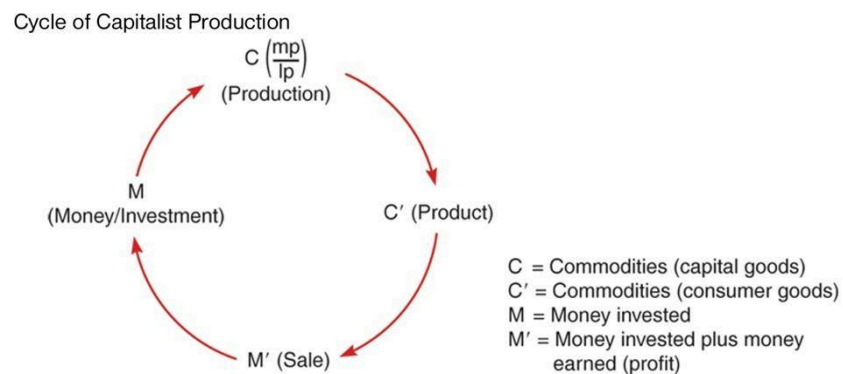


Figure 1. Cycle of capitalist production from Robbins (2005) p. 42

The expression (mp/lp) refers to the combination of money and commodities to manufacture commodities of higher value

Of course, this entire cycle is driven by demand for commodities by those wishing to purchase them, and it is to those, the customers, which we now briefly review.

The Consumer

This economic cycle, although considered to have become embedded in our society relatively recently, (Hugill 1993) suggests that “We have learned to tie the “success of capitalism to the tremendous increase in world trade that began in the 1400s as Europe

expanded overseas...” (p.1). Hunt & Murray (1999) also recognise that even earlier trading was performed in the Carolingian empire between 730 and 849 (p.26). Today, we use the word “consumer”; I guess it was merely a “buyer” in those times. Whatever term we use, there is no doubt that there has been a demand for products for centuries, and some form of trade has ensued. However, the most significant difference between then and now is that with technological progress and the exponentially increasing global population, demand would increase for many necessary commodities, mainly foodstuffs, clothing and other necessities. However, as Robbins (2005) describes, it was early in the 20th century that businesses started to change their method of store display, and advertising became a standard method to create consumer awareness, even for non-essential products – like mink stoles. This was developed by recognising consumer trends such as clothing style in vogue, lifestyle factors such as metrosexual cosmetics, and other changes in how social groups directed themselves (Ghaffari et al. 2019). It also always puts a pleasant face on the commodity being sold: T-shirts with funny sayings printed on them, food with families gobbling and grinning at each other to show how delicious the stuff is – but never showing the sweatshops where the material is stitched in monotony, or the hard work of agricultural work producing grains from the planting, harvesting, storing and transporting that goes into delivering those goods to the consumer.

Also, with the increasing speed and efficiency of technological progress, as more of the global population has AI, it identifies access to the Internet, social groups and individuals. This identification of access by whom is used by marketing agencies, explicitly targeting searchers with products aligned with their earlier Internet searches. This, of course, is with the principal interest of the seller increasing their profits by greater sales and the consumer frequently purchasing a trinket that may be no more than an item sitting on a shelf and never used. It could also be a useful cheap item made in an Asian country in a factory where scores of folk are employed, receiving wages that barely keep them fed. This then turns to the more socially affecting part of the cycle of capitalism: the labourer.

The Labourer

Robbins (2015) makes a clear statement that “The consumer may drive the culture of capitalism, but without the labourer, there would be no commodities to consume” (p.39). In many Western societies, labour is fairly treated with appropriate income and other features

such as the additional amount set aside for Superannuation for Australian employees and adequate annual and sickness leave benefits. However, not so for others who work in other less fortunate countries to which Western countries such as Australia outsource the manufacture and fabrication of some of their product owing to lower local labour costs. It is to these other groups of people that we often lose sight of their plight.

In some of those “offshore” countries, labour supply and demand are as ubiquitous as the supply and demand of certain commodities. Perhaps for that very reason, people are sometimes considered expendable in the same manner. For this reason alone, “many production processes are causing severe damage to the environment and create health hazards for workers and local populations” (Gerdes et al. 2022, p.124) and:

It makes those regions economically dependent on the rules of free international trade, resulting in lower wages and exploited labour; on the other hand, the local environment is heavily damaged due to large amounts of solid waste and the use of toxic chemicals.
(ibid.p.131)

The labourer is an integral part of the capitalist cycle, both to produce profitable rewards, income for the one and profit for the other. Still, sadly, these rewards are often unevenly received, and the cost of labour is often at the expense of losing their environment, health and culture.

Conclusion

We started with an introduction that referred to Leonardo DiCaprio, who played a sterling part in the movie “Blood Diamond”. The cruelties experienced by those toiling in direct sunlight, wading through mud, and grovelling about for small glassy objects are pitiful. But this, nevertheless, is not too dissimilar to how many people have to eke out a living with their labour. In the scenario above, it is doubtful that any such diamond found would provoke the ultimate wearer to think about those people who did find it. Similarly, many of the products we, the consumers, see advertised and eventually purchase do not have notices on them asking us to think about those who made them for us and the laborious efforts undergone in doing so. Masking the truth of commodity production is, in many cases, a positive step for the capitalist in ensuring greater sales of products. Still, it is certainly something that more people should reflect on, not only to appreciate how much toil and hardship others have exerted and experienced to make our lives more comfortable but to make more informed decisions in their purchases.

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