

I will argue that social processes of capitalism manifest themselves through practices of everyday life and that to be reflexive of it is to initiate a critique of everyday life. This essay will unfold from a theoretical standpoint by engaging with the ideologies of capitalism, particularly how accelerated and expansive mass production has brought forth a consumerist society in which one's sense of agency and freedom has come to be defined by monetization and obsession with objectification. The McDonaldization of society and compression of time have led to people's lives becoming quantified and capital accentuates the volatility and ephemerality of commodities that annihilate time and space. Due to different forms of deprivation, people resort to consumption as a means against coercion, control, and subjugation but also to compensate for the loss of control of one's life. In doing so, people assign value to what they purchase every day in which the concept of "authenticity" is heavily involved. However, I contend that such an emancipatory concept is manipulated by capital which injects a modicum of life into work and consumption for an earlier failing polity and economic apparatus to carry on. My emphasis will be on the inwardness of a calling for authentication which fragments individuals and leads to disastrous consequences. But human beings are not ultimately vulnerable in such a condition even though we have been rendered powerless. I hope to do so by analyzing how I perceive the dichotomy between authentic needs and false needs as wrong and the everyday practices available to ordinary people in defending their private spaces and claiming their autonomy.

A McDonaldized Society

Ritzer has referred to the acceleration of capitalism as the “McDonaldization of Society” (2021). Although I would contend that this notion has limitations because of its exclusive focus on American society, the study of the fast-food industry and the principles derived from the analysis capture some of the most essential elements that make up the logic of capitalism. Therefore, I will demonstrate how capitalism governs our lives by utilizing those insights. He defines the “McDonaldization of Society” as a process by which the principles of fast-food restaurants are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world (Ritzer, 2001: 19). The principles are efficiency, calculability, and predictability (ibid). In order, I shall demonstrate how these principles have contributed to the process of societal rationalization which has quantified human life, making the collective living experiences a large-scale computerized social programming. First, efficiency concerns finding and using the optimum method for getting from one point to another (Ritzer, 2001: 20). Workers in a McDonaldized manufacturing system often follow a pre-designed and well-choreographed process in which there is little to no space for improvisation and creativity. In this process, workers are not viewed as entire people, but only a conglomeration of their functions. In other words, they are no longer themselves. Calculability is a second principle that is deployed to make efficiency a “tangible” quality (a quantified quality). Because the quality is only allowed to vary little, workers are often assessed on how quickly they can accomplish a task via pre-set means of doing it. As a result, work is mere

repetitions of what has been done in the past and there is no value attached to what has been accomplished by the workers. What they have to do is to complete tasks as soon as possible as long as the quality is consistent throughout and in this, fastness is somehow equated with quality not only of the finished product but also of the value of the worker. Moreover, quantity is no longer a paradigm through which people explain the world. It has become a politicized term that suppresses workers who work in a system that is fashioned on McDonaldization. The third principle is predictability because there is not necessarily anything new to be made, what is produced is to be expected. By extension, workers should behave in a regulated and predictable fashion such as following the corporate rules, dictates from their managers, and demands of the systems with which, and in which they work (Ritzer, 2021: 21). Ritzer lays out control as the fourth principle, but I argue that control is the utmost manifestation of the aforementioned principles rather than a separate one that is exerted on workers that controls what they do and defines who they are. The McDonaldization of society makes up what Weber would call a “disenchanted system” because it eliminates the meanderings and aimlessness of society as well as the unspeakable moments in life characterized by luck and magic. On top of this, I argue that this system also McDonaldizes personality in denial of humanity. Every day for workers is just another day of inspection from managers who would tell them to toe the line. There is no realization of the self, let alone actualization of self-fulfillment through work. Swiftiness is a key word here as to how people organize their lives and the implications it has on people’s psychology and behavior which I

will unfold in the analysis that follows. The technological acceleration embedded in the Law of Capitalism means that less time is needed for production and other social activities which should entail an increase in free time and slow down the pace of life (Wajcman, 2015: 16). However, the general speed-up has not rendered more spare time for people, but time is scarcer. The compression of time is evidenced by modern households. Phenomena such as “I don’t have time to cook”, “I should make more time to spend with family” demonstrate the contradictions inherent in the capitalist system. It is emblematic of the “irrationality of rationality” where the conflict between an efficient food diet and the desire for healthy food made from scratch becomes irreconcilable. Promoting speed in one area of life begets the need to regulate, even to suppress it in others. As a consequence, lack of time with children is often compensated by buying them toys, and in the same way, lack of time with parents is compensated with healthcare products. It gives rise to the deeply seated psychological reasons for unnecessary consumption in a capitalist society in which people’s sense of self and sense of freedom come to be defined by money and possessions. The paradox highlights the intrinsic connection between the increased pace of life and the peculiarity of money. On this note, freedom and humanity are encroached by both the world of production and consumption. Anti-capitalism sentiments emerge and grow prevalent in the public discourse. However, capitalism repairs itself in this moment of crisis and thrives on it.

In pursuit of the authentic self in occupation and consumption.

The overbearing scale of capitalist employment casts a formidable shadow over social life and invades the private space where people feel they can finally become who they are. An occupation means profound unfreedom where we do what we are told in order to make a living. Mortifications can be tolerated and condoned as long as we can enjoy the “stolen moment” of joy. While the notion of absolute freedom is deemed unattainable, that of authenticity stays within reach. Rather than being singled out as a place where authenticity is not welcomed, modern corporations have adopted the new management philosophy of “just be yourself”. It entails encouraging employees to exhibit and celebrate individuality and taking pride in welcoming people from diverse backgrounds into the workplace (Fleming, 2009: 116). The permission to publicly display individual traits has been praised as a leap towards a non-exploitative capitalist system because now employees are “free” to express themselves and presenting a contrived identity is unnecessary (Fleming, 2009: 2). It is believed that liberating the once inappropriate attributes can motivate employees to be more productive. Liberating oneself in this way is futile because liberation is premised on the potential to be more productive at work. In addition to this, Fleming has argued that the authenticity communicated at workplaces is by a large a byproduct of the axiomatic virtue of Western currents of individualism (2009: 23). What accompanies this individualism is a reinforcement of subjective categories which means that one should seek authenticity within the self. Theodor W. Adorno critiqued unequivocally the inwardly individualistic authenticity from a philosophical

standpoint in his book *The Jargon of Authenticity* (2007). Drawing on work from the existentialist school, he launched an attack against the works of Heidegger and Kierkegaard by stating that the reconciliation between the inner and outer worlds, which Hegelian philosophy hoped for, has been postponed ad infinitum (Adorno, 2007: 58). The radical inwardness and the narcissistic obsession with the self is self-defeating because the claim of people being blessed simply by virtue of being what they are can turn into an elitist claim without any effort (Adorno, 2007: 61). As a result, each individual function, created under law of self-preservation, becomes so firmly congealed that none can exist by itself, that no life can be constructed out of its functional pieces, and the individual functions turn against the self which they are supposed to serve (Adorno, 2007: 54). On top of these accusations, I see another biggest issue with radical inwardness which is that it has lost the dialectical mediation of subject and object, in other words, the presuppositions and discussions of human subjectivity must be dialectically related to the historical context in which determinate subjects are shaped. Failure to do so leads to the catastrophic fallacy of reductive subjectivity as the facts of “selfness-on-its-own”. To analyze it on empirical grounds, employees now are not able to come to the realization that capitalism is the original cause of their loss of authenticity. The inwardness makes them seek authenticity in the besieged area rather than realizing that the “subjective authenticity” is not only self-made but also constructed within the contingent social and cultural space. Once the distinction between private dimensions of unique individuality and public working environments is blurred,

corporations are now more equipped to distract them as a corporate resource (Fleming, 2009: 31). Individuals insofar as more of the person is integrated into the discourse of labor as they get a “life of sorts” at work; and collective in that every space of non-production for one person is invariably the space of production for another (Fleming, 2009: 52). This is very much articulated by the popular Corporate Social Responsibility exercise in which employees with socially progressive values are able to give “back to the community” on company time (Fleming, 2009: 97). In doing so, employees, rather than seeking and gaining the “so-called” emancipation in their workplaces, have become assets for corporations on which they can advertise the humanness of their conduct to counter modern, socially progressive movements such as boycott. Management of capitalism is able to revive itself as long as it represents the internalization of an expansive or aesthetic critique of capitalism (Boltanski et al., 2007: 168). Likewise, pundits have discovered the quest for authenticity in the realm of consumption which they define as “purchasing on the basis of conforming to self-image” (Gilmore & Pine, 2007: 27). What they buy must reflect who they are and who they aspire to be in relation to how they perceive the world. In the realm of consumption, the privately conscious authenticity against universal commodification indeed reinforces commodification and makes us stuck in what we are trying to escape. Therefore, the radically inward authenticity is a form of “individualized conformism” which is a bogus claim both in theoretical and pragmatic sense because we are separated into social roles, whether as employees or consumers which makes us incapable of addressing the

collective human living conditions, not in a compartmentalized way, but in a way that can make us understand the internal connections between what makes up our life. Any solution that falls short of this leads to a pursuit of something fake whether that be authenticity or freedom. Pierre Bourdieu, in his large ethnographic collection in which he analyzed the conflicts between the old permanent workers and the temporal workers on precarious contracts after France neoliberalized their economy, has portrayed the antagonism between the two groups when the “old ones” go on strike (Bourdieu & Accardo, 1999: 257-281). Because those precarious new workers do not bear the right to go on strike, to the workers taking industrial action, they become imposters who “rebel” against the glorious strike traditions. At the same time, they emphasize those who are precarious because they understand their plight which is characterized just by much less protection, and that they do not get to enjoy the luxury of industrial actions. The high level of politicization of the event inevitably pits the two groups against each other but they in fact resemble the same thing: victims of neoliberalized capitalism but just in different forms. What distinguishes them from each other is a lifestyle where the dichotomy between “a member of trade union” and “a non-member of trade union” gets amplified. It has articulated very well that addressing the living and working conditions the two generations both inhabit is the way to restore the solidarity of workers, otherwise, workers can only live with much vulnerability and anguish.

Transactional authenticity? Or defend our agency?

Marcuse has been highly critical of the distorted consumption, calling it “false needs” by which he states that it is unnecessarily more than what humans need to sustain a life. Although he did not make the statement in the context of authenticity, the injection of authenticity has transformed the nature of consumption and has rendered the need-production relationships obsolete because it does not capture the political inquiry in the socio-political vacuum that I argue is becoming increasingly characterized by spiritual needs. The intensity of the market setting is no longer about mere subsistence and the inherent quality and characteristics of commodities prevalent in less advanced economies is destroyed by the very intensity, fury, and diversity of the market setting. Traditionally, commodities, although indispensable, were not regarded as endowed with the exclusive potential to satisfy human needs because not all human needs are under the sway of material objects. The fluidity of technological characteristics of commodities has made once capable and ordinary consumers unable to grapple with the value and knowledge of commodities. Even though one has mastered this skill, it cannot be long-lasting because it will always be nullified by generations of new, improved products. The cultural consequence of this non-coherent interconnection is that the “high-consumption ideal” tends to orient all aspects of an individual striving for personal satisfaction towards the realm of commodification (Leiss, 1978: 50). The labyrinth of commodities is prefabricated to facilitate the gradual fragmentation of human personality as the precondition market domination. Therefore, the constant revision of commodities is not the result of pure advances in science or technology but a

conscious policy. Henri Lefebvre contends that only a critique of it is the way forward which he takes as his starting point. With enormous range and subtlety, he argues that everyday life is the remaining source of resistance and change even though the “trivial” details of quotidian experiences are colonized by commodity and shadowed by inauthenticity (Lefebvre et al., 2014: 334). Michel de Certeau has demonstrated through his research that the outcomes of production are the lexicon of users’ practices (2013: 57). Therefore, once the products are analyzed on their own, it remains to be asked what consumers make of what they absorb, receive, and pay for? What do they do with it (ibid)? He argues that consumption is another form of production and I quote “In reality, a rationalized, expansionist, centralized, spectacular and clamorous production is confronted by consumption and characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation (the result of the circumstances), its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless but quiet activity, in short by its quasi-invisibility, since it shows itself not in its own products (where would it place them?) but in an art of using those imposed on it” (Certeau, 2013: 58). This has powerfully demonstrated how practice has become an important site on which consumption gets redefined. But it is worth noting that it is a battle between the strong and the weak and with the “practices” that remain possible for the latter. What follows very much involves anecdotes through which I will articulate how the Chinese Gen Z population reproduces what they consume through very creative practices. With that being said, despite being anecdotal, I do not think they constitute substandard academic practices. Firstly, a long-sleeve t-shirt can be changed into a short-sleeve by cropping parts of the

sleeve off. The cropped part can be used as a towel to wipe surfaces such as a table or a stove. If the t-shirt is not purely white, the embroidery can be cut off by scissors and mounted into a frame or a picture which can be used to decorate the house. A glass can be used as a container for condiments such as sauce in bags, as well as a vase for some green plants. Unused masks can be used to store some dry flowers on which fragrance is sprayed and can substitute aroma diffusers or scented candles. The knowledge the activities embody goes against the ones representative of capitalism, namely the rationalization of production. They require a great deal of gesture, and creativity which are not easily replicated, and thus constitute the qualitative aspects of life that can be full of surprise and unexpectedness. The multi-use of a single subject reveals what I would say “To possess is a responsibility and a commodity is a burden”, we take the initiative to decide how much burden we are willing to take. Our life is not a congregation of the commodities we possess, but of our ability to creatively use them, juxtapose them, and appropriate them. The non-confrontational and non-revolutionary resistance belongs to the weak in society who do not want to succumb to the overbearing apparatus of capitalist consumerism but do not see an easy solution that lies ahead.

This essay has argued that fast capitalism has had a detrimental impact on how people live their lives, leading to a loss of selfness and a reconfiguration of life under the influence of capitalism. Fast capitalism thrives on its ability to appropriate and manipulate people’s quest for authenticity, making it a

formidable and enduring force. However, I remain hopeful that humans are capable of counteracting the effects of fast capitalism by focusing my analysis on the subtlety of human practices, showing that everyday practices defend a space for creativity and freedom against the unyielding ideology of capitalism by protecting what can come straight from human personality.

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