

Commodity Production and Consumer Lifestyles

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1. Introduction

In the capitalistic economic system, the means of living, i.e., the goods and services that people need in order to live, are produced and provided primarily by private business enterprise and supplemented by the public, regional and national government organizations.

This paper aims to illuminate the features and problems of such capitalistic modes of production from the viewpoint of the quality of the citizens' consumer lives. In discussing this subject, we will

- (1) make clear the general characteristics of consumer life from the viewpoint of “living labor” in which we are obliged to engage in order to procure the means of living. As the result of this effort, we will learn about the desire of people to externalize their living labor and the problems inherent in this desire;
- (2) we will understand commodity production by business enterprises as one way of the externalization of living labor and investigate the features and the problems of the capitalistic system of commodity production;
- (3) we will understand the public provision of goods and services by government organizations as another way of the externalization of living labor and also as compensating for the flaws of private business enterprises in commodity production, and throw light on the problems immanent in public practices by government organizations; and
- (4) we will point out the need to re-internalize living labor through cooperative associations and understand the practices of nonprofit organizations (NPOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as efforts that correspond to this need, i.e., efforts to compensate for the flaws of private profit organizations and public government organizations in the act of production.

2. Consumer Life of Citizens and the Externalization of Living Labor

We can understand the consumer life of citizens as the practices through which they transform, in principle, at each of their homes “consumer materials” by the use of the “consuming instruments” into “life” and “labor power.”

In this case, we call the consuming materials and instruments together as the “means of living.” In order to transform the means of living into life and labor power, citizens must carry out labor, which we call “living labor.” We can, therefore, understand the consumer life of citizens as the practices through which citizens combine the means of living and living labor so as to produce and reproduce life and labor power.

Now, we must pay the attention to the fact that living labor is to produce, acquire and use the means of living, and therefore consists of the two kinds of activities: (1) instrumental and preparatory activities and (2) activities that constitute the aim itself. The former is often difficult, dangerous and dirty labor, and can be carried out by someone else. Citizens would like, therefore, to have other people perform it. We call this desire “the externalization of living labor.” The second group of activities are end-consumption activities such as eating food, wearing clothes and living under shelter, and cannot be carried out by anyone else.

Regarding this desire of citizens to externalize living labor, we must point out the following three features:

- (1) Instrumental and preparatory living labor have the nature of “production labor,” for which solidarity among citizens, cooperative effort and social learning are necessary. By contrast, end-consumption activities are, in principle, private and lonely. Therefore, the externalization of living labor tends to degrade and break down the nature of the family and the community as places of human association by converting them into places of consumption alone.
- (2) The more instrumental and preparatory activities are taken over by other people, the more unnecessary it is for citizens to acquire skills needed to carry out living labor, and this results in an atrophy of living competence.
- (3) The externalization of living labor means a separation between the producers of the means of living and its consumers. The producers and consumers do not acknowledge each other’s existence. This gives rise to a degradation of the means of living on the one hand and their wasteful use on the other.

3. Capitalistic Economic System and Consumer life

The following could be pointed out as the three general characteristics of consumer life in a capitalistic economic system:

- (1) both the means of living and living labor are produced as commodities by private business enterprises searching for profits;
- (2) the means of living and living labor are utilized as commodities so that life and labor power are produced and reproduced;
- (3) the labor power produced and reproduced is sold as a commodity by consumers to business enterprises, so that consumers can buy means of living and living labor as commodities

In short, in the capitalistic economic system, labor power as a commodity is produced from both the means of living and living labor as commodities.

From these general characteristics of the capitalistic economic system, we can extract the following features of capitalistic consumer life:

- (1) The quality of the means of living and living labor as commodities decides the quality of the consumer life of citizens. We must here pay attention to the following fact: commodities tend to deteriorate

from the viewpoint of the consumer in terms ensuring the health and safety of consumers, total life span of the commodity, recyclability and the preservation of the ecological system.

- (2) The sum of wages, which business enterprises pay for labor power as a commodity, decides the sum of the means of living and living labor as commodities that citizens can utilize.
- (3) The skills needed to carry on consumer life smoothly depend on the kind of commodities that business enterprises produce and sell
- (4) Severe competition among business enterprises oblige business enterprises to innovate products and the production process continuously.
- (5) The uniformity of mass-produced commodities by business enterprises destroys traditional, individual and ethnic ways of the consumer life of each family, regional, community or nation.
- (6) As the skills needed to produce the means of living and to carry out living labor become unnecessary, living competence begins to atrophy.
- (7) As social learning and cooperative effort among members of the family or community become unnecessary, families and communities begin to atrophy and self-collapse.
- (8) While commodity production by business enterprises satisfies the desire of citizens to be released from the heavy, daily living labor, it can not totally emancipate citizens from production labor. It obliges them to work as wage laborers in the business enterprise. And wage labor is labor that is under the planning and control of the buyer of labor power. If a husband's wages are not enough to buy commodities, his wife must also participate as a wage laborer in commodity production.
- (9) If husband and wife must work together for a living in the business enterprise, they need to buy care for infants, the young, the old and the sick as commodities.

4. Development of Capitalism and Consumer life

What kinds of influence would the development of a capitalistic economic system have on the quality of the consumer life of the citizens? We understand here as the development of capitalism (1) the universalization of commodity production through business production, i.e. the creation of the universal market, (2) the monopolization of commodity production and (3) the management of citizens' needs by the business enterprise as producer.

- (1) About the universalization of commodity production, we could say with Braverman: "In the period of monopoly capitalism, the first step in the creation of the universal market is the conquest of all goods production by the commodity form, the second step is the conquest of an increasing range of services and their conversion into commodities, and the third step is a 'product cycle' which invents new products and services, some of which become indispensable as the conditions of modern life change to destroy alternatives. In this way the inhabitant of capitalistic society is enmeshed in a web made up of commodity goods and commodity services from which there is little possibility of escape except through partial or total abstention from social life as it now exists." (Harry Braverman 1998, p.194)
- (2) The monopolization of commodity production by a few business enterprises means the decreasing possibility of independent commodity production as well as the decreasing ability of citizens who lack experience to provide themselves with the means of living. As a result, it becomes very difficult for

people to evaluate the fairness of price and quality of commodities.

- (3) The longer the gestation period for commodities, the more necessary it is for producers to manage and manipulate the needs of consumers. And the more affluent people's consumer life becomes physically, the more possible it is for producers to manage consumer needs. Because "The further a man is removed from physical need, the more open he is to persuasion – or management – as to what he buys." (John Kenneth Galbraith 1985, P.210). As a result, consumer lifestyles are created initiatively by the producer. We would live not in the economic system of consumer's sovereignty, but in the economic system of producer's sovereignty. (Galbraith 1985)

5. Other Considerations Regarding Commodity Production

So far, we have intentionally thrown light only on the problems of commodity production by private business enterprise. But we must here consider the contributions of commodity production to mankind.

- (1) We should first affirm that commodity production by business enterprises is an important way of externalizing hard living labor in so much as that commodity production contributes to the satisfaction of the desire of citizens to externalize their living labor.
- (2) Commodities are often so much more convenient, useful, variegated, professional and economical than self-made products that citizens buy commodities more than creating their own.
- (3) Commodity production releases people, specially women, from hard living labor, especially household labor. This helps them develop independent personalities and autonomy that comes from making their own living.
- (4) The mass production of commodities for low price elevates living standards for the masses, which enables a democratization of consumption.

Even though commodity production makes many contributions to our lives in this way, we can not ignore that there are some major problems inherent in this system of commodity production. Above all we can not ignore that (1) were it not for the opportunity of profit, commodity production could not exist and (2) it atrophies the living competence of citizens and leads to the collapse of family and community. We could here say that government organizations make an effort to solve the former problem and NPOs and NGOs make efforts to solve the latter problem.

6. Public Service by Government Organizations

The desire of citizens to externalize living labor can be satisfied by private business enterprises only if the opportunity for profit exists. In the absence of the opportunity for profits, the desire to externalize living labor would or would have to be satisfied by the regional and national government organizations. This is not all. Even though the opportunity for profits exists, if the risk of monopolization were very high, government organizations would have to provide the necessary goods and services in the place of private business enterprises. In this way, many of the problems inherent in the system of commodity production could and should be solved by government

organizations.

But with respect to quality of goods and services provided by the government, it could be pointed out that another kind of problems are immanent.

- (1) The first problem is inherent in the budgeting system of government organizations. “The public-service institution is based on a ‘budget’ rather than being paid out of its results.”(Drucker 1986 P.179) And “They (Public-service institutions---Murata) tend to see their mission as a moral absolute rather than as economic and subject to a cost/benefit calculus.”(Drucker 1986 P.179) Even if their mission is really isolated from the true needs of inhabitants, it is very difficult for government organizations to innovate goods and services. We must here point out with Peter F. Drucker that “the forces that impede entrepreneurship and innovation in a public-service institution are inherent in it, integral to it, inseparable from it.”(Drucker 1986 P.178)
- (2) The second problem is that public services are often so uniform that they do not correspond to the local and individual needs of inhabitants.
- (3) The last and most important problem is that government provision of the goods and services is also one way of externalizing living labor and can not entirely, therefore, solve the problem of the atrophy of living competence and the collapse of family and community life.

7. The Need for Cooperative Associations

The last problem is structurally inherent in the desire of citizens for the externalization of living labor. This means that each citizen must reflect on his/her own desire to externalize living labor and make efforts to re-internalize it. In order to re-internalize living labor, it is necessary for each citizen to take part in cooperative associations and to carry out once again the process of living labor with another person. We can understand the efforts of consumer cooperative societies, voluntary associations, NPOs and NGOs as that of a re-internalization of living labor in order to acquire living competence and to reconstruct family and community again.

Bibliography

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