ISR Italian Sociological Review
University of Verona, Italy
ISSN 2239-8589 | Editor in Chief Paola Di Nicola
Managing Editor Debora Viviani

The Consumer Society and the (False) Myth of Mass Democratisation

Maria Cristina Marchetti

How to cite
Marchetti, M. C. (2017). The Consumer Society and the (False) Myth of Mass Democratisation. **[Italian Sociological Review, 7 (4), 421-436]**
Retrieved from [http://dx.doi.org/10.13136/isr.v7i4.203]

[DOI: 10.13136/isr.v7i4.203]

1. **Author information**
Maria Cristina Marchetti
Department of Political Sciences, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

2. **Contact authors'**
E-mail: mc.marchetti@uniroma1.it

3. **Article accepted for publication**
Date: April 2017

The Consumer Society and the (False) Myth of Mass Democratisation

Maria Cristina Marchetti*

Corresponding author:
Maria Cristina Marchetti
E-mail: mc.marchetti@uniroma1.it

Abstract

About fifty years from its first publication in 1970, *La société de consommation. Ses mythes ses structures* (Paris Denoël) confirms itself as a lucid analysis of the meanings at the basis of the consumption dynamics within contemporary society.

In what he calls the 'mystique of equality', the concept of needs is linked to that of well-being, triggering the illusion that the increase in total amount of goods an individual can possess automatically translates into a levelling of society and in total well-being for all. According to Baudrillard, this approach does not take due account of the *social logic* of consumption, at which level the differentiation process for the retention of social distances is reiterated. Thus, according to Baudrillard, a mechanism that powers social differences survives through a consumerist ideology disguised as egalitarianism.

Hence, Baudrillard distances himself from Marx and from the concept of value in use, understanding that at the base of mature capitalism does not lie production (and thus the dialectic of capital/labour force), but consumption.

Years later, the system of consumption presents itself unchanged, to the extent that in some respects the postmodern aesthetics has actually exasperated its characteristics, blending the needs of production with an individual differentiation process that seems incapable of finding other ways of expression.

Keywords: Baudrillard, consumer society, mass society.

* Department of Political Sciences, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy.

1. Introduction

Rereading *The Consumer Society* (1970) today, and starting from its *Introduction*, would allow the reader to experience the inheritance collected in this text, and at the same time its anticipatory nature with respect to phenomena that are the backbone of contemporary societies. As pointed out by Alberto Izzo (1976) in the *Introduction* to the Italian edition, there is no doubt that Jean Baudrillard, though mostly implicitly, followed up on the works of such authors as Ortega y Gasset, Simmel, Durkheim, but especially Veblen (1899); in fact, it is rather easy to identify the echo of Marxian *commodity fetishism*, and to Marx and other classical economists are also attributable categories widely used throughout this work, such as those of use value and exchange value. Last but not least, the influence of the *Frankfurt School* must also be remembered, and in particular the criticism of Adorno and Horkheimer's cultural industry contained in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947).

The biggest influence, however, doubtlessly originate from French cultural expressions involving literature, anthropology, and philosophy, which are frequently contaminated with each other, as in the case of the works of Marcel Mauss, George Bataille, Alfred Jarry, through whose contributions Baudrillard retrieves an 'aristocratic critique' of the economy (Bataille, 1976). It is on this basis that Baudrillard will be able to continue, in his later works and especially in *The Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976), his move to postmodernism.

At the same time, the description of Parly 2 – a modern shopping centre – which opens the volume, anticipates by several decades the *Non places* of Augé (1995) or the 'cathedrals of consumption' of Ritzer (1999). With the intuitive ability that only great authors possess, Baudrillard describes a place that in 1970 must have represented, in his imagination, a futuristic *dystopia* equal to that described in Orwell's *1984*, and which at that time was beginning to take shape in Paris, a city whose *passages* had already witnessed a dramatic change in the early twentieth century (Benjamin, 1982). No longer places of consumption but themselves products, modern shopping centres take the form of theme parks and resorts, cultural objects that summarise the dynamics of what, from then on, will be the *consumer society* for us all.

But the real novelty consists in the methodology, which regarded consumption as a system of signs, a code, used to highlight the social differentiation processes that are specific to the context. In this way, Baudrillard makes the attempt to combine Marx and structuralism, in a multilevel reading that does not neglect the sociological perspective: consistent throughout the work is the implicit reference to the concept of social stratification and that of anomie, which is evoked from the title to the last

chapter. At the same time, as it will be explained below, the concept of the *social logic of consumption*, which is at the heart of Baudrillard's reflection, does not have a purely sociological or Marxist connotation, but is definitely structuralist: as Baudrillard believes that it is the differentiating system of signs that determines the individual act (Ritzer, 1999).

This process of analysis had already been started by Baudrillard in *The System of Objects* of 1968, and finds in *The Consumer Society* (1970) its fulfilment, and in *The Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976) its openness to other perspectives. While participating in a tradition of study focused on the *social significance of consumption*, Baudrillard anticipated, as will be explained below, the successive developments of the postmodern era, and the reverse process of *de-ideologisation* and *de-socialisation* of consumption that is occurring in contemporary societies (Viviani, 2012).

2. The symbolic exchange and the critique of the economy

In 1970, when *The consumer society* was published, society had already been affected for some years by what in economic jargon is known as the 'market saturation': the economic boom that followed World War II was running out its driving force, while '68 opposition movements were showing the contradictions of a production system that revolved increasingly more around consumer pressure, careless of the consequences on the social level.

The great contribution that the sociology of consumption gave to economy is to have favoured the dismissal of the notion of functional utility of goods, compared to their symbolic meaning: while the concept of functional utility may play a role in an economic expansion – and this is not entirely true even in such phase – the same is unable to meet the needs of production in the process of saturation of the market. In practice, if the slogan with which Mr. Ford launched the Model T – 'You can have any colour as long as it's black' – could make sense in that phase of history, while today it would condemn any business to failure.

It is at this level that the analysis of the dynamics of the consumer society demonstrates its separation from the typical notions of classical economics. The sphere of consumption and to a greater extent the role of the consumer in the production process has always constituted the weak link in the economic theory, which is entirely focused on the factors of production. In fact, when this concept was acknowledged on the theoretical level, around the model of the *homo economicus*, who by definition is consistent and rational in its behaviour, the consumer was considered an irrelevant variable of every economic process. According to this model the subject, when placed in a

position to make a choice, always tends to maximize the results and reduce the costs. Economic theory ends up making an abstraction of the consumer's behaviour, a theoretical exercise that is not reflected in reality. It therefore highlights the limitations of a concept of a consumer that contains, since the dawn of classical economics, an *'ideological surreptitious nature'*: in fact, it arbitrarily operates a division between reality – that of the consumer – and other activities of daily life (Fabris, 1995: 96). On the contrary, the subject carries with it in his consumerist behaviour all the experiences, images, and relationships acquired in everyday practice: the political, cultural, and religious choices are the result of processes of interaction that the subject establishes with its surroundings and that in turn determine the nature of its relations.

The redefinition of the notion of economic exchange, which is entirely focused on quantitative aspects, is measured through a dual path: *a)* the dismissal of the concept of the functional utility of goods and *b)* the recovery of the symbolic meaning of the exchange.

Regarding the first aspect, the individual goods were always evaluated by the economy in relation to their ability to meet the needs. Social sciences have long questioned about the nature of the needs because they originate actions both individual and collective in nature. In a purely psychological sense, they are powered by a set of instincts, passions, emotions, feelings that Pareto encompasses in the concept of *residues* (*residui)*.

The notion of primary need has had a classical fundamental role, in which the conventional needs, which historically and socially determined the working class, identify the level of subsistence, i.e. the basket of consumer goods without which the working class cannot reproduce in the quantity and quality demanded by capitalist accumulation. The concept developed by Smith and Ricardo of a natural wage is based precisely on the possibility of determining the set of such conventional needs. And it is from the identification of the minimum subsistence level that Marx is able to develop his theory of surplus value, which value produced in excess by the worker and accumulated by the capitalist.

By distancing itself from the Marxist view, *The consumer society* also recovers the idea of contrast between pre-modern societies, which are organised around a symbolic exchange, and modern societies, which in turn are organised around the production and exchange of goods. It is this glorification of pre-modern primitive societies that will mark the passage of Baudrillard to postmodernism, in fact founded on an *enchanting* process of a world dominated by economic rationality (Ritzer, 1999). In fact, modern societies have also evolved dramatically, developing the field of secondary needs, putting classical economics in direct confrontation with the large field of the illogical components of action, which contribute to changing its course,

steering it in a totally unpredictable way, toward the direction of the superfluous, irrational, and of the symbolic power of exchange.

The use of the concept of 'use value' as the ability of a product to satisfy a basic need, introduces a levelling within the processes of exchange, which is far from representing the reality. The dispute around the factors that from time to time determine the value of goods constituted in fact one of the central themes of the reflections of classical economics, which is divided between the notion of 'use value' and that of 'exchange value'. When confronted with what has been called the 'paradox of value', which refers to the fact that some goods are apparently very useful (water) but have little or no exchange value, while other goods are of little use (diamonds) but possess a high exchange value, classical economists determined that such paradox was the result of the amount of work required to produce each good (labour value).

The path traced by Baudrillard opens a stream of analysis designed to have a large following. In 1979 in his work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste,* Bourdieu enacts a critique of the way in which goods were considered by economic theory.

> To hypothesize, as one of them does, that consumers perceive the same decisive attributes, which amounts to assuming that products possess objective or, as they are known, 'technical' characteristics which can impress themselves as such on all perceiving subjects, is to proceed as if perception only seized on the characteristics designated by the manufacturers' brochures (and so-called 'informative' publicity) and as if social uses could be derived from the operating instructions (Bourdieu, 1989 [1979]: 100).

As the first theories on the action of the media have assumed that, under the influence of behavioural psychology, all individuals subject to the same stimulus would give the same response, economy has assumed that all consumers, when placed in front of an identical object, would manifest the same behaviour in terms of consumption, favouring the product that, for the same performance, had the lowest cost. Bourdieu goes on to say that 'Objects, even industrial products, are not objective in the ordinary sense of the word, i.e., independent of the interest and tastes of those who perceive them, and they do not impose the self-evidence of a universal, unanimously approved meaning' (Bourdieu, 1989 [1979]: 100). It is for this reason that he develops a 'social critique of taste', starting from which it is possible to classify the behaviours of consumers based on a series of variables such as their sex, income, profession, academic title, etc. As he states, 'Taste is an acquired disposition to "differentiate" and "appreciate", as Kant says – in other words,

to establish and mark differences by a process of distinction' (Bourdieu, 1989 [1979]: 466).

Starting from this definition it is necessary 'to move beyond the abstract relationship between consumers with interchangeable tastes and products with uniformly perceived and appreciated properties to the relationship between tastes which vary in a necessary way according to their social and economic conditions of production, and the products on which they confer their different social identities' (Bourdieu, 1989 [1979]: 100-101).

What is being questioned is the very objectivity enshrined by the functional utility of goods. On the contrary, 'What is at stake is indeed "personality", i.e., the quality of the person, which is affirmed in the capacity to appropriate an object of quality' (Bourdieu, 1989[1979]: 281).

The sociology of fashion is perhaps the area in which the overcoming of the notion of functional utility of goods and the recovery of the symbolic dimension of the exchange has produced over the years the most interesting reflection. From the dialectical differentiation/integration indicated by Georg Simmel (1905) as a distinguishing feature of every fashion phenomenon, classical sociology has repeatedly focused on an apparently superficial phenomenon that is actually able to produce consistent behaviour in the face of a low level of internalization of the proposed rule. Fashion thus recovers the non-logical dimension of action and also introduces it inside economic action; with its periodic changes, it lends itself well to satisfy the needs of the consumer society, while maintaining the high demand for goods and meeting the needs of individuals either as individuals or within groups (Marchetti, 2004).

3. The social meaning of consumption and of the 'mystique of equality'

Whatever the criticisms of economic theory, the analysis of Baudrillard is undeniably still placed within the *social logic of consumption*. This expression is used to identify all the actions and behaviours that have as their ultimate goal, be it latent or manifest, that of signalling their social position. 'That logic is by no means that of the individual appropriation of the use-value of goods and services – a logic of unequal abundance, some having rightful access to the miracle, others merely to the by-products of the miracle. It is a logic not of satisfaction, but of the production and manipulation of social signifiers' (Baudrillard, 1999 [1970]: 60).

In fact, he states that 'you never consume the object in itself (in its use-value); you are always manipulating objects (in the broadest sense) as signs

which distinguish you either by affiliating you to your own group taken as an ideal reference or by marking you off from your group by reference to a group of higher status' (Baudrillard, 1999 [1970]: 61).

Based on the social logic of consumption 'needs and satisfactions trickle down in accordance with an absolute principle, a kind of social categorical imperative which is the maintenance of distance and of differentiation by signs' (Baudrillard, 1999 [1970]: 62)

The *trickle effect* has been used for about a century to interpret the changes in the sphere of fashion consumption. This is the underlying dynamic of status symbols, objects consumed in order to signal the social position or upward aspirations of individuals within the social stratification. It was Simmel (1905) who attributed to this mechanism the change of fashions, aimed at keeping unchanged the social differentiation in a highly hierarchical model of society. In the fifties, Fallers (1954) took these classic suggestions to develop the theory of trickling down to explain the changes in fashion.

In his work *La barrière et le niveau* (1905), philosopher Edmond Goblot underlined that the *level* an individual tries to achieve through distinction, raises a barrier that excludes the majority of the population from the fashion phenomenon. These barriers may consist of economic, cultural and political factors, but the most influential role is played by the necessity of meeting a series of unwritten behavioural codes, the knowledge of which is reserved to the upper classes[1]. This is the spirit of the bourgeois society, which originated from the affirmation of industrial capitalism and is based on an *economic ethos* and a model of rationality that has its cornerstone in the ordering function of money (Elias, 1969).

In this sense, as claimed by Baudrillard, 'it is quite possible that strictly consumer aspirations (material and cultural) – which, for their part, display a much greater degree of elasticity than professional or cultural aspirations) – in fact compensate for the serious underachievement of certain classes in terms of social mobility' (Baudrillard, 1999 [1970]: 63-64)[2].

The trickle effect would thus enable upper classes to introduce changes in fashion and consumption patterns, while lower classes are seized by the need to emulate the upper class, resulting in a tendency to imitation which often

[1] Since ancient times, the enactment of sumptuary laws aimed at regulating every aspect of clothing and furnishing of the house (of a train's length, the number of beads provided for decoration, etc.), was an instrument used by upper classes to control the social rise of the lower classes.

[2] 'The compulsion to consume might be said to compensate for failure to rise up the vertical social ladder. At the same time as expressing a status demand, the aspirations to "overconsume" (on the part of the lower classes in particular) might be seen as expressing the felt failure of that demand' (Baudrillard, 1970: 64).

takes on a purely compensatory nature. Therefore, the dynamics that underlie the social significance of consumption allow the coexistence of a strictly rational logic and its opposite, aimed at undermining the principle of functional utility assets. On one side, in fact, we see an instrumental use of consumption aimed at representing social position, and on the other an attack on the notion of the functional utility of goods.

At present, the level at which the individual appropriation of goods takes place in relation to their value in use is moved further downwards compared to the years in which Baudrillard wrote. *Low cost* chains in the fashion, tourism, and catering industries re-absorb the effects of the economic crisis, managing to meet the individual need for self-representation which partly escapes Baudrillard, too. It is the act itself of consumption – and even prior to purchase – that becomes a place of production of meanings, regardless of the content.

Therefore, 'All men are equal before objects as use-value, but they are by no means equal before objects as signs and differences, which are profoundly hierarchical' (Baudrillard, 1999 [1970]: 90). Thus, according to Baudrillard, the consumerist ideology disguised as egalitarianism, survives a mechanism that powers the social differences and maintains social stratification. This is one of the key passages of the text, because one can see the limits of a concept that establishes a strict equation between access to consumer goods and the democratisation of society. The society of consumption would make the democratisation process slide from the political level to that of the consumer: the equality of rights is thus transformed in the equal opportunity of access to the supermarket of consumerism, which in turn is not immune to a differentiation process conducted according to the symbolic meaning of objects. A pen is the same object for everyone if we look at its function (writing), however it proposes a top-down social differentiation system if we look at its symbolic meaning (a Montblanc pen).

According to Baudrillard, the circle of the *social logic of consumption* therefore closes around the perpetuation of a society that is rigidly divided into classes and characterized by an ascending dynamic which pushes the system as a whole upward. This becomes the premise to the analysis of Baudrillard, even when it seems to open a consumption de-socialization process. This occurs twice: the first time when introducing the reference to the 'constellation of products', and the second in the chapter dedicated to the concept of customisation or 'smallest marginal difference SMD'.

Regarding the first aspect, Baudrillard recognises that consumption, like school, fuel a mystique of equality that is entirely formal. 'And it is, by contrast, on this homogeneous abstract base, on this foundation of the *abstract democracy of spelling or the TV set*, that the real system of discrimination is able to

operate – and to operate all the more effectively' (Baudrillard, 1999 [1970]: 59). In fact, consumption products 'for, in themselves, and taken individually (the car, the razor, etc.), they have no meaning: it is their constellation, their configuration, the relation to these objects and their overall social "perspective" which alone have a meaning. And that meaning is always a distinctive one' (Baudrillard, 1970: 59).

This openness towards considering the modalities of product consumption anticipates the notion of 'lifestyles' that has replaced the *social logic of consumption*. Despite this, the distinctive sign which is referred to is always brought back within a social differentiation process that follows an ascending logic. It is still an elitist-conflictualist vision, typical of a layered system (Ragone, 1988; 2000).

The second aspect refers to the concept of customisation or 'minor marginal difference MMD' to which Baudrillard devotes an entire chapter. From this point of view, the system which regulates the functioning of the consumer society aims to first eliminate any real difference between individuals, in order to proceed subsequently to a process of artificial reproduction of differences for commercial purposes: 'we can see that the system never operates in terms of real (singular, irreducible) differences between persons. What grounds it as a system is precisely the fact that it eliminates the specific content, the (necessarily different) specificity of each human being, and substitutes the differential form, which can be industrialized and commercialized as a distinguishing sign' (Baudrillard, 1999 [1970]: 93). Individual differences are dysfunctional for the production system that cannot handle or indulge with them. It must therefore reset and replace them with an artificial differentiation system reconstructed for the use and consumption of the market. From this and other passages it becomes clear the strong attention of Baudrillard, in line with Marx and the classical economists, for the time of production to which he still attributes a central role: it is the needs of production that drive the behaviour of consumers and not the opposite. The consumer thus regains an active role only when he comes in possession of the products, but the time of production and consumption in his vision are destined to remain separate.

At the same time, what echoes in these passages, even in the language used, is the thought of the *Frankfurt School* as outlined in the analysis of cultural industry sketched by Adorno and Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: 'Something is provided for everyone so that no one can escape; differences are hammered home and propagated. The hierarchy of serial qualities purveyed to the public serves only to quantify it more completely' (Horkheimer, Adorno, [1947] 2002: 97).

Neither Baudrillard is distracted by counter-trends such as *underconsumption* or *inconspicuous consumption*, which use the logic of social differentiation in the opposite direction, shunning all ostentation and search, under the slogan of 'less is more', the distance that is the sign of subtler difference.

The contemporary phenomenon of *mass customisation* highlight the developments in this process: the bottle of Coca Cola or the jar of Nutella bearing the name of the consumer; Nivea cream tubes customised with the pictures of consumers, the ability to customise Nike shoe models by choosing the colour of laces, uppers, lining, the choice of fashion accessories for cars (the colour of the rear-view mirrors or design objects for decoration) provide an illusion of differentiation that, once it reaches the level of extreme individualisation, does not allow a decoding process and fails to distance itself from the mass production process.

The obsession with social differentiation fully places *The consumer society* in the tradition started by modern social theory. The reflection on the social meaning of the consumer has in fact brought the consumer's behaviour in the field of social stratification as the modality of representation of their social position or upward aspirations of the lower classes, which are not always satisfied by the dynamics of social mobility. From this point of view, mass society would be less open and democratic than it may appear at first, reiterating dynamics of social differentiation. This debate has invested every aspect of cultural production in mass society – the media cultural industry, from fashion to advertising – highlighting from the start the contradictions of a system that produces social differentiation according to market logic, even when it declares its intention of wanting to eradicate it at the social and political level.

4. The *desocialisation* of consumption and individualistic aesthetic

Actually, what really has changed compared to the suggestions contained in Baudrillard's analysis, is the change from the social to the individual level of the differentiating action of consumption, as the dynamics of the consumer society meet the cultural climate of postmodernism. It is at this level that we can say that *The consumer society* marks a divide between the first and the second phase of the reflection of Baudrillard. As pointed out by Ritzer in the *Introduction* to the English edition of 1998, those looking for the postmodern style of Baudrillard's latest works will be disappointed (Ritzer, 1998). *The consumer society* is a text still firmly anchored to the great traditions of modernist thought, even when the author tries distancing himself from it.

Postmodern aesthetics has paved the way to a process of 'deideologisation' (Fabris, 2003: 65) and 'desocialisation' of consumption that has pushed back the primacy of statutory value of objects in favour of individual pleasure (Lipovetsky, 1987). In this context, the differentiation process moves from the social to the individual level: it is the subject who is placed in a position to choose from the range of options – in terms of value, culture and behaviour – that contemporary societies provide, reharmonising them according to an individual path that is never taken for granted or final. The postmodern aesthetic calls into question the very theories of mass society, encouraging the flourishing of small and large differences of opinion (Lipovetsky, 1987; 2006): these are the hints that make the difference, the individual microcosms, the processes of acquisition of goods related to the emotion of the moment.

The progressive aestheticisation of the social bond (Ferry, 1990; Maffesoli, 1990) that characterises the tribes of postmodernism (Maffesoli 1988), undermines at its very foundation the concept of membership that was developed by modernity. The social bond is not established on the basis of socio-functional choices – status, classes, and hierarchies – but from the emotion of the moment. What unites individuals are therefore the most elusive and less rationally sought reasons: in fact, once the emotional bond that unites the individual to a given group ceases, nothing prevents this subject from experiencing other emotions, other places, moving from one tribe to another in search of new experiences. This is the essence of contemporary nomadism (Maffesoli, 1997): a need of 'elsewhere', destined to never be satisfied by any *form* that may be considered as final, and which makes continuous experimentation the very purpose of life.

In this context, fashion can present itself in any cultural manifestation. It is in fact the only social phenomenon that manages to reconcile the need for change with the stability of associated living, thus filling – or giving the illusion of filling – the enabling deficit that characterises all institutions of modernity. An interesting parallel is thus established between fashion and contemporary culture, due to the fact that fashion is not only an observable phenomenon on a par with others, but is itself a form of associated living, according to the process that has been defined in terms of 'becoming fashion of the world' (Maffesoli, 1993: 66).

'Being fashion' of the world gives the sense of a society that, like fashion, has newness as its guiding principle (Svendsen, 2004), in a race that erases time, even the time of consumption. The speed of change in the consumer sphere can be countered only through the recovery of a time of use of property that respects individual needs: slow food, vintage and heritage act on fashion time by slowing them down. In contrast, the frenetic pace of fast fashion, the planned obsolescence of games, technology, and cultural products

show how to play a central role in contemporary society no longer pertains to the consumer as such – since it is bound by time – but to the purchase itself, which is frenetic, impulsive, conducted in the wake of momentary emotion that complies with the need for self-fulfilment that struggles to find other channels of expression. In this highly fragmented environment, consumption becomes an activity that is completely individual and solitary in nature, that stimulates and satisfies a desire based on a subjective feeling that is not easily communicable (Bauman, 1998).

5. Contradictions of the consumer society

Contemporary sociology is indebted to *The consumer society,* as this work has powerfully clarified the role taken by the sphere of consumption within social dynamics (Codeluppi, 2003): once it is freed from the transfer of production factors, the act of consumption becomes the variable from which to interpret many phenomena that characterise post-modern societies (Inglheart, 1997; Jameson, 1991).

The establishment of the consumption action in the life of individuals not only affects their daily practices, but also their political activity and relationship with institutions. Just think of the changes introduced in the public sector governance by the New Public Management, which turns the citizen into a customer/consumer, or the electoral market that turns the voter-citizen into a universe to explore with the most sophisticated techniques of market analysis or through the use of big data for commercial purposes. The political action of the new social movements often passes through political consumerism practices that open the way to consumption patterns that take into account not only economic criteria, but also ethical ones (Tosi, 2006).

Urban space planning also develops from the centrality gained by the consumer sphere (Codeluppi, 2014): shopping centres have become the meeting space of neighbourhoods, which transform their social function and redesign public spaces accordingly (squares, streets, and neighbourhoods). Shopping centres, holiday villages, theme parks, and fast food chains thus become *Non places*, where the historic character, relationship and identity of the place is replaced by an abstract rationalism that favours the function over the relational dimension (Augé, 1995).

At the same time, the consumer society needs its places of worship, within which to celebrate its rituals, becoming themselves '*new means of consumption* or in other words the settings or structures that enable us to consume all sort of things' (Ritzer, 1999: 6). Like new 'cathedrals of consumption … have an enchanted, sometimes even sacred, religious

character for many people' (Ritzer, 1999: 8); at the same time they require high levels of rationalisation in order to be reproduced in different environments (e.g. franchising chains) and to enable an organised management of mass consumption[3]. In the McDonald's world described by Ritzer (1993) – efficiency, calculability, predictability and control – translate into a total irrationality of a system that aspires to total control of production processes without ever reaching.

In addition to this, any boundary between production and consumption has been cut down as evidenced by the notion of *prosumer*, elaborated by Toffler (1980) and resumed by Ritzer, who identifies in the 'prosumer capitalism' the contemporary form of capitalism (Ritzer, Jurgenson, 2010). 'The major social theorists of production (e.g. Marx) and consumption (e.g. Baudrillard) too strongly distinguished between these two spheres; they can be said to have suffered from either a productivist and/or a consumptionist bias' (Ritzer, Jurgenson, 2010: 17). As Ritzer assesses 'it is on Web 2.0 that there has been a dramatic explosion in prosumption' (Ritzer, Jurgenson, 2010: 19), even though it is difficult to assert that web 2.0 represents a new model of capitalism, from the control exercised by corporations.

What does not escape Baudrillard is

> 'the real, uncontrollable violence secreted by plenty and security once a certain threshold has been reached. This is no longer integrated violence, consumed with the rest, but the uncontrollable violence which wellbeing secretes in its very achievement. That violence is characterized (precisely like consumption as we have defined it, though not as superficially understood) by the fact that it is *aimless and objectless*' (Baudrillard, 1999 [1970]: 174).

This concept brings to mind the violence of youth gangs, depression, and drug use as anomalies of the affluent society (one of many quotes from Galbraith), that when drawing up the consumption equation=happiness, it produces within itself a sense of deprivation due to the fact that it generates expectations it will never fully meet. Moreover, while the consumer society puts everyone in the condition of accessing a supermarket on a 24/7 basis, it does not grant the same modality of access to everyone: if self-fulfilment passes through consumption, not having access to it is perceived as non-

[3] 'As is the case with religious cathedrals, the cathedrals of consumption are not only enchanted, they are also highly rationalized. As they attract more and more consumers, their enchantment must be reproduced over and over on demand. Furthermore, branches of the successful enchanted settings are opened across the nation and even the world with the result that essentially the same magic must be reproduced in a wide range of locations' (Ritzer, 1999: 9).

being, and the consequences can be violent or self-destructive. 'Under-consumption', even before unemployment, is what currently characterises the condition of the poor and the way in which poverty is perceived (Bauman, 1998).

The proliferation of signs and the excessive use of a symbolic language by the consumer society produces a vertigo that nullifies any ability to communicate or differentiate[4]. The symbolic overload that characterises the contemporary communication systems thus reduces, rather than expanding, the communicative power of objects. Once again, it is fashion that highlights the contradictions of the consumer society. 'Contemporary with political economy and like the market, fashion is a universal form. In fashion, all signs are exchanged just as, on the market, all products come into play as equivalents. It is the only universalisable sign system, which therefore takes possession of all the others, just as the market eliminates all other modes of exchange' (Baudrillard, 2000 [1976]: 92). The differentiation process, thus deprived of its social meaning, is transferred to individual differences, at which level the possibilities to communicate that flow from the combinatorial logic of formal elements are practically limitless, and for that very reason, more difficult to decode.

References

Augé M. (1992), *Non-lieux*, Paris, Seuil; (1995), *No-places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Surmodernity*, London, Verso.

Barthes R. (1967), *Système de la Mode*, Paris, Seuil.

Bataille G. (1976), *La limite de l'utile (fragments)*, Paris, Gallimard.

Baudrillard J. (1968), *Le système des objects*, Paris, Gallimard; (1996), *The system of objects*, London, Verso.

Baudrillard J. (1970), *La société de consommation,* Paris Denoel; (1999) *The consumer society. Myths & Structures*, London, Sage.

Baudrillard J. (1976), *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, Paris, Gallimard; (2000), *Symbolic exchange and death*, London, Sage.

Bauman Z. (1998), *Work, consumerism and the new poor*, Buckingham, Open University Press.

Benjamin W. (1982), *Das Passagenwerk*, (R. Tiedemann Eds.), 2 vol., Suhrkamp Verlag.

[4] For this, see the concept of 'deception of sense' theorised by Barthes (1967).

Bourdieu P. (1979), *La distinction: critique sociale du jugement*, Paris, Edition de Minuit, 1979; English translation, (1989) *Distinction. A social critique of the judgement of taste*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
Codeluppi V. (2003), *Il potere del consumo*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri.
Codeluppi V. (2014), *Metropoli e luoghi del consumo*, Milan, Mimesis.
Douglas M., Isherwood B. (1979), *The world of goods*, New York, Basic Books.
Douglas M. (1996), *Thought styles: critical essays on good taste*, London, Sage.
Elias N. (1969), *Die höfische Gesellschaft*, Darmstad, Verlag GambH.
Fabris G. (1995), *Consumatore & Mercato*, Milan, Sperling & Kupfer.
Fabris G. (2003), *Il nuovo consumatore: verso il postmoderno*, Milan, FrancoAngeli.
Fallers L. A. (1954), "Fashion: a Note on the Trickle Effect", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 18, Issue 3, 314-321.
Featherstone M. (1991), *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, London, Sage.
Ferry L. (1990), *Homo Aestheticus: l'invention du gout a l'age democratique*, Paris, Grasset.
Goblot E. (1967), *La barriere et le niveau*, Paris, PUF, 1967 (1° ed. 1925).
Horkheimer M., Adorno T. (1947), *Dialektik der Aufklarung. Philosophische Fragmente*, Amsterdam, Querido Verlag; (2002), *The dialectic of enlightenment*, Standford, Standford University Press.
Inglheart R. (1997), *Modernization and postmodernization: cultural, economic, and political change in 43 societies*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
Izzo A. (1976), "Presentazione" a *La società dei consume*, Bologna, Il Mulino.
Jameson F. (1991), *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, Duke University Press.
Lipovetsky G. (1987), *L'empire de l'éphémère*, Paris, Gallimard.
Lipovetsky G. (2006), *Le bonheur paradoxal: essai sur la société d'hyperconsommation*, Pari, Gallimard.
Maffesoli M. (1990), *Au creux des apparences*, Paris, Plon.
Maffesoli M. (1997), *Du nomadisme. Vagabondages initiatiques*, Paris, Libraire Générale Française.
Maffesoli M. (1988), *Le temps des tribus. Le déclin de l'individualisme dans le sociétés de masse*, Paris, Rééd.
Marchetti, M. C. (2004), *Manuale di comunicazione, sociologia e cultura della moda. Vol. I – Moda e Società*, Rome, Meltemi.
Ragone, G. (1988), a cura di, *Sociologia dei fenomeni moda*, Milan, FrancoAngeli.
Ragone G. (2000), "*Mode di élite e mode di massa*" in A . M. Curcio (a cura di), *La dea delle apparenze. Conversazioni sulla moda*, Milan, FrancoAngeli.
Ritzer G. (1993), *The McDonaldization of Society*, Thousand Oaks, Pine Forge Press.
Ritzer G. (1998), "Introduction" to Baudrillard J., *The consumer society. Myths & Structures*, London, Sage.

Ritzer G. (1999), *Enchanting a disenchanted world. Revolutionazing the means of consumption*, Thousand Oaks, Pine Forge Press.
Ritzer G., Jurgenson N. (2010), "Production, Consumption, Prosumption", *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 10 (1), 13-36.
Secondulfo D. (1994), *La danza delle cose. La funzione comunicativa dei beni nella società post.industriale*, Milan, FrancoAngeli.
Simmel G. (1905), *Die Mode*, Berlin, Pan.
Svendsen L. F. H. (2004), *Mote. Et filosofisk essay*, Oslo, Universitetsforlaget.
Toffler A. (1980), *The Third Wave*, New York, William Morrow.
Tosi S. (a cura di) (2006), *Consumi e partecipazione politica. Tra azione individuale e mobilitazione collettiva*, Milan, FrancoAngeli.
Veblen T. (1899), *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, London, MacMillan.
Viviani D. (2012), "Jean Baudrillard: cynism or truth?", *Italian Sociological Review*, 2 (1), 57-65.