

Is contemporary anti-consumerism a form of romantic anti-capitalism?

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"It is as ridiculous to wish to return to that primitive abundance as it is to believe in the continuing necessity of its complete depletion. The bourgeois view has never got beyond opposition to this romantic outlook and thus will be accompanied by it, as a legitimate antithesis, right up to its blessed end."

- Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*¹

"So long as the realm of necessity remains a social dream, dreaming will remain a social necessity"

- Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*²

Consumerism seems all-encompassing in advanced Western societies today. While theorists have discussed the 'consumer society' for over a century, the concept appears to be especially applicable today, in which people increasingly formulate their life goals through the acquisition of goods.³ Critics of consumerism have accompanied the spread of mass consumption since its beginning, although the basis on which they have done so has varied from religiously-inspired moral condemnation of indulgence to elitist reproaches of mass society.⁴ As of the 1930s, critiques of the consumer society were advanced by Leftist intellectuals, in particular by the Frankfurt School, whose ideas found expression in the emergence of the counterculture in the 1960s. It is in this context that we will examine whether contemporary anti-consumerism is an expression of a broader critique of capitalist society. Indeed, capitalism has never been short of its opponents. Anti-capitalism has shadowed capitalism throughout its history, such that anti-capitalism could be said to be 'the most significant expression of capitalism in the eyes of history'.⁵ What we hope to reveal, then, is not just the nature of contemporary anti-consumerism *qua* anti-capitalism, but also the 'spirit of capitalism' today, against which the contemporary anti-capitalist critique is mobilised.

The choice of anti-consumerism as the object of this study can be explained by reference to a major socio-political change in Western societies. Today's era of TINA (There Is No Alternative) signifies that the social conflict over production, which characterised left-right politics for nearly two centuries, has declined. The result is that capitalist relations of production and the surplus have to an extent been naturalised. The favoured realm for political activity has therefore shifted to the realm of consumption. This trend is evident in the dominance of 'identity politics' in which identities are constructed in the realm of consumption, or more obviously in the remarkable rise of ethical consumerism. In this context, it does not sound like an exaggeration when Gabriel and Lang claim that 'the consumer' has become one of the most contested terrains in politics today.⁶

Why, however, should we seek to explore contemporary anti-consumerism under the heading of Romanticism? This approach seems incongruous and arbitrary. After all, Romanticism denotes, *prima facie*, a literary and artistic movement that is now two centuries old. Furthermore, its *political* content is by no means self-evident. 'Romanticism' evokes notions of effusive emotionalism and nostalgia, but that in itself is hardly rigorous enough to use as a political category. Nor were the Romantics uniform in their political orientation, if they expressed any clear political attitudes at all. It seems specious to explore whether a contemporary political phenomenon (anti-consumerism) can be characterised as having similarities with a literary and artistic movement that expressed itself in times very different to our own. The question posed herein might be considered no more than an intellectual curiosity.

¹ Karl Marx, 'Alienation, Social Relationships and Free Individuality' in McLellan (1980), p. 71

² Debord (1994), p. 18

³ Stearns (2006), p. vii

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 66-78

⁵ Jean Baechler, *Le Capitalisme*, cited in Boltanski & Chiapello (2005), p. 36

⁶ Gabriel & Lang (1995), p. 187

This, however, is not the case. Abstracted from its particular historical context, Romanticism is a term that designates a universal current throughout capitalist modernity. We will argue here, following the work of sociologist Michael Löwy, that Romanticism (specifically 'romantic anti-capitalism') is a form of critique and a worldview that forcefully rejects the present in the name of pre-capitalist values. Romantic anti-capitalism, in all its manifestations, positions itself as the diametrical opposite of bourgeois society. Romanticism *qua* anti-capitalist rebellion is bourgeois society's 'legitimate antithesis'. Romantic anti-capitalism accompanies capitalism throughout most of its history, periodically recurring, but in different forms and reflecting the material conditions and ideology of capitalism at the time. In this sense, romantic anti-capitalism is not a socially, temporally and geographically *particular* phenomenon, but a much more universal *Weltanschauung*.

Before addressing selected case studies of contemporary anti-consumerism in the West, we will outline the principal characteristics of the romantic anti-capitalist worldview. The first section of this study will therefore focus on Löwy's work on the subject, drawing out the most general elements. Of course, this section does not pretend to be a survey of Romantic thought in general, much less an attempt at an original interpretation of Romanticism. At an obvious level, this reflects the fact that plumbing the depths of Romantic Studies is well beyond the scope of this study. More importantly, the reliance on Löwy's work on romantic anti-capitalism should be understood to an explicit endorsement of his approach to the subject. This is not to take Löwy's word on the matter as gospel. Rather, his work will be evaluated (and hopefully illuminated) by drawing on the insights provided by Boltanski and Chiapello on the 'artistic critique' of capitalism and by Marshall Berman on the 'politics of authenticity'.

After outlining the main tenets of romantic anti-capitalism, we will turn to the core analytical section of this study wherein three cases of contemporary anti-consumerism will be judged in light of Löwy's work. The selected cases are of a popular nature. This reflects two important contentions: firstly, that anti-consumerist attitudes have become generalised amongst certain sections of Western societies, and secondly, that romantic anti-capitalism often takes on a populist character, being as it is an un-dialectical, emotional reaction to the shortcomings of the capitalist present. The first case to be considered is that presented by *Adbusters* magazine. It has been selected for two reasons. The first is because it draws quite explicitly on the politics of the 1960s counterculture and in particular the theory of Guy Debord, whom Michael Löwy claims belongs decidedly to the romantic revolutionary tradition.⁷ The second reason is that *Adbusters* can be seen as part of the 'anti-globalisation' movement, the newest and most recent expression of anti-capitalism in the West. The second case to be considered also draws on the legacy of the 1960s counterculture: the Voluntary Simplicity Movement (VSM). The reason for treating the VSM as a form of romantic anti-capitalism is that 'voluntary simplicity' has a significant environmentalist component, an important force behind mainstream anti-consumerism today, and one which, *pace* its scientific elements, holds to Romantic notions of the natural. A further reason for examining the VSM is that it is also a form of lifestyle politics, the rise of which is another legacy of the counterculture. The final case of contemporary anti-consumerism is Benjamin Barber's *Consumed*, which puts forward an evidently anti-consumerist viewpoint, but from a different tradition than the first two. Barber, an American political theorist whose work has primarily dealt with questions of civil society, was selected as emblematic of the *mainstreaming* of anti-consumerist attitudes today.

We will see that romantic anti-capitalist characteristics are present in each of the three, but to varying degrees. While all put forward alternative visions of the individual human subject and the community which they deem to be more authentic than that present today, all three lack nostalgia for a *specific* pre-capitalist golden age, even if they implicitly hark back to an earlier period of capitalism. Indeed, we will see that in rebelling against the contemporary ethos of capitalism, they either repeat the critique of the counterculture (*Adbusters*) or their rebellion is framed in such a way that the ideals they hold to are ones present in an earlier age of capitalism. We will seek to explain why this is in the third and final section. In doing so, we will aim to show that the contemporary 'spirit of capitalism' does not lend itself to a romantic

⁷ Löwy (2002)

revolt, precisely because many of the countercultural values of the 1960s have already been internalised by bourgeois society.

What is 'Romantic anti-capitalism'?

As suggested above, Romanticism escapes easy definition. Löwy and co-author Robert Sayre note in the article, 'Figures of Romantic Anti-Capitalism', that in literary studies of Romanticism, the boundaries of the latter are rarely extended so far as to be conceived of as a worldview.⁸ In the social sciences, Romanticism remains underused, because as such a protean and elusive movement, it resists categorisation along the lines familiar to social scientists, historians and philosophers (such as left and right; progressive and conservative; liberal and authoritarian; realist and anti-realist; and so on). Yet Löwy and Sayre's insistence on the importance of 'an overall analysis, from a Marxist perspective, of Romanticism as a *Weltanschauung*, in its full historical extension and in terms of its sociological foundations' is based on a perception of Romanticism's recurrent role over the course of two centuries.⁹ Indeed, the authors begin by noting romantic anti-capitalism's re-appearance in recent years under the guise of the 'new social movements' in Europe (in particular, with pacifism and ecology).¹⁰

The value of Löwy & Sayre's method is best appreciated in contrast to other understandings of Romanticism. The diversity and contradictory nature of Romanticism is widely noted; so much so that a major figure in the study of Romanticism, A.O. Lovejoy, went so far as to advise not to use the term Romanticism at all, and certainly not in the singular.¹¹ Roy Porter similarly suggests we speak instead of various national Romanticisms, in symbiotic relation with one another. Although the Romantics in general critiqued the collapsing old order in Europe with as much vigour as the bourgeois society that followed in its wake, Porter argues that, as a whole, Romanticism does not lend itself to political interpretation.¹² When attempts *have* been made to stretch Romanticism beyond its purely literary/artistic manifestations, it has often been conceived of as a reaction against the abstract, mechanistic rationalism of the Enlightenment. This interpretation is appealing as it allows one to posit a dialectic of 'reason' and 'Romanticism' running through modernity. However tempting this may be, it rests on a misunderstanding of Romanticism. Consider the figure of Rousseau, standing at the crossroads of the Enlightenment and the Romantic Movement. While inescapably a man of the *siècle de lumières*, he also stood apart from his fellow *philosophes* in his ambiguity towards civilisation. Rousseau's was both an expression of Enlightenment thought and of its *radicalisation*. Conceiving of Romanticism exclusively as a reaction to the Enlightenment cult of Reason (and thereby defining Romanticism as exuberant irrationalism) thus becomes difficult.

Most Marxist interpretations, on the other hand, are more useful in so far as they generally conceive of Romanticism as 'opposition to capitalism in the name of pre-capitalist values'.¹³ However, most 20th century Marxists have tended to dismiss the phenomenon as merely a reactionary bourgeois outlook. This was in spite of Romanticism's often explicit anti-capitalist component.¹⁴ Indeed, the past-orientated nature of many Romantics was not a hindrance to their grasping of the depredations of capitalism. Instead, it allowed them to counterpose – albeit in an un-dialectical fashion – the sense of loss experienced in and through capitalist modernity, to the supposed 'fullness' of the (idealised) past; and in some cases it even provided them with the armoury to transcend the present.

This total rejection of the present, often expressed in a highly emotional register, is what Löwy and Sayre identify as the primary component of romantic anti-capitalism. The cultivation of the

⁸ Löwy & Sayre (1984), p. 43

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 51

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43

¹² Porter & Teich (1988), p. 4.

¹³ Löwy & Sayre (1984), p. 46

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47

imagination allows romantic anti-capitalists to perceive acutely the gaping distance between prosaic modern capitalist reality and the idealised past.¹⁵ As the authors pithily put it, if capitalism is the disenchantment of the world (Weber), romantic anti-capitalism is its re-enchantment through the imagination.¹⁶ Romantic anti-capitalism will also direct its critique at the effects of capitalism felt by *humanity as a whole*. Here, the contrast with 'non-romantic' anti-capitalism (if one will permit the oblique phrasing) is clear: the latter has at its core a theory of exploitation and praxis of class politics. For most romantic anti-capitalists, this is absent. Instead, the target of the Romantic criticism is the *quantification of everything*: a world of exchange-value over use-value. The effects of capitalism that *cut across* social classes are seized upon, such as alienation, reification and the radical isolation of the individual in atomistic, competitive society.¹⁷

A second important component of romantic anti-capitalism is nostalgia. The romantic anti-capitalist makes use of a mythical golden age to attack the society of his day. While many Romantics of the early 19th century would look to the medieval period in search of suitable ideals, romantic anti-capitalism, in the more general sense utilised by Löwy, does not rely on one single historical period. Löwy cites the primitive age, Greek or Roman antiquity, the Renaissance and the pre-revolutionary *ancien regime* as possible mythical golden ages. What is important, instead, is the *selection* and *interpretation* of the period; this choice varies according to the critic and the object of criticism.¹⁸ As we will argue when we come to evaluating contemporary anti-consumerism, the mythical past need not be temporally that distant.

If we are to submit contemporary anti-consumerism to the category of romantic anti-capitalism, we will need to identify some of the positive values of romantic anti-capitalism. Marshall Berman's study of the 'politics of authenticity' is relevant here. Berman defines the politics of authenticity as the 'dream of an ideal community in which individuality will not be subsumed and sacrificed but fully developed and expressed.'¹⁹ This sort of thinking, Berman explains, is simultaneously old and new. It is new in the sense that it is exclusively *modern*; the yearning for authenticity would only not be found in a closed, static society governed by fixed norms and traditions.²⁰ It is old in the sense that the question of authenticity has been a *leitmotif* of Western culture since early in the 18th century. It remained so, according to Berman, until 1848, as of when the left-right debate over collectivism versus individualism replaced it. The politics of authenticity made a return in the 1960s, in which it took the form of a complaint against capitalism for not being *individualistic enough*. Berman understands this demand for individualism as a yearning for self-realisation and full self-development. Löwy similarly sees one of romantic anti-capitalism's two primary positive values as 'individual subjectivity'. The search for the authentic subject arises out of a contradiction in capitalism: where capitalism calls forth the autonomous individual from history to perform a socio-economic function in the capitalist economy, it also simultaneously represses what is immanent in that autonomous individual – a fully developed sense subjectivity (the 'full development of the self in all its affective capacity').²¹ Romantic anti-capitalism exploits this contradiction in its critique. The second positive value of the romantic anti-capitalist worldview is unity or totality. This can be expressed as *unity with nature*, as in the Romantics' reaction against the separation of town and country. It may also be *unity with humanity* via the organic community, as opposed to the fragmentation and atomisation of capitalist society. The two positive values are not mutually exclusive, nor, according to Löwy and Sayre, are they both

¹⁵ Löwy & Sayre (1984), p. 54

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 55

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 56

¹⁹ Berman (1970), p. vii

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xvii. Berman notes that for Rousseau, the protagonist of Berman's book, the canton of Valais was seen as such a place. In Rousseau's writing, the Valais functioned as an idealised 'Other' against which the corruptions of modern civilisation could be counterposed. Rousseau can be seen as one of the first to introduce the question of authenticity into modern theory and is certainly a 'romantic anti-capitalist'.

²¹ Löwy & Sayre (1984)

found in every romantic anti-capitalism. The full expression of one can be seen of as the fulfilment of the other (and therefore its attenuation).

Before turning to the object of our investigation – anti-consumerism – it is worth drawing on a final source to flesh out our understanding of romantic anti-capitalism. Boltanski and Chiapello, in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, argue that *indignation* at the conditions of capitalist society always precede the elaboration of a theoretical critique. We may note here a similarity with Löwy's emphasis on the emotional nature of the Romantic reaction. This indignation can be in response to four factors: disenchantment or inauthenticity; oppression (either direct oppression as in the discipline imposed by managers over the workers, or as the oppression of the market and the commodification of the world); poverty or inequality; and egoism or opportunism. For Boltanski and Chiapello, the first two give birth to what they term the *artistic critique*, while the latter furnish the raw material for the *social critique*. In this study, we will mostly concern ourselves with the former. The two authors explain that the artistic critique is a response to a sense of loss of meaning, value or beauty in world. While the artistic critique is not identical to the Romantic criticism of modern society, (as the former need not refer to an idealised past) the two do share a great deal of similarity. Indeed, Boltanski and Chiapello comment that the artistic critique concerns itself primarily with alienation, whereas the social critique directs itself towards exploitation, just as romantic anti-capitalism tends not to concern itself directly with class politics. Just as with Berman's contention that the politics of authenticity made a return in the 1960s, it is Boltanski and Chiapello's contention that the artistic critique was to the fore in the 1960s counterculture, reaching its apotheosis in the events of May 1968. For this reason, in discussing contemporary anti-consumerism, we will draw upon the insights of all three aforementioned studies (and their concomitant terminologies).

Contemporary anti-consumerism: three cases considered

As a consequence of the socio-political changes stated above (decline in conflict over production, etc), much political thought now operates in a 'post-material paradigm'. As the social critic James Heartfield explains, '[t]he post-material paradigm brings together the depoliticisation of the struggle over the social product and a 'dematerialisation' of the social product.'²² The consequent privileging of *consumption* means that oppositional movements, such as the ones to be considered here below, often direct their critique at those perceived to be the *agents* of capitalism in this sphere – the advertising and marketing industries. In the words of Jurgen Habermas, today we have moved from a 'culture debating' to a 'culture consuming' society. This supposedly less critical mindset means that, for anti-consumerists, discursive, public and psychic space can increasingly be colonised by advertising and marketing.²³

Kalle Lasn, and the magazine of which he is editor-in-chief, *Adbusters*, provides a prime example of this tendency, expressed in a manner that resembles Löwy's account of romantic anti-capitalism. In Lasn's *Culture Jam*, we find a total rejection of the present, the harking back to an idealised past, a valuing of the imagination, and a yearning for the authentic subject and unified organic community – but in varying degrees. His opposition to the consumer society also approximates what Boltanski and Chiapello's *artistic critique*. Lasn places himself (and his magazine, media foundation and associated activists) as the heir to Guy Debord and the Situationists; in his words, 'social agitators whose chief aim was to challenge the prevailing ethos in a way that was so primal and heartfelt it could only be true.'²⁴ Lasn aims to replicate that aim today through a radical interjection in the consumer society, such that it causes a 'shock to the system', awakening the consumerist masses from their 'soma'.²⁵ We may note the similarity here to anarchist notions of *die Tat* – a romantic act which in a flash transform society.²⁶ This is motivated by the understanding that the entire

²² Heartfield (1998), pp. 20-21

²³ Habermas, cited in Rumbo (2002), p.129

²⁴ Lasn (1999), p. 99

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xiii

²⁶ Bell (1996), p. 6

culture has become a *spectacle*. Indeed, the 'shock to the system' is more necessary than ever: Lasn claims that the stultifying passivity and alienation of the spectacle today has gone far beyond anything Debord and the Situationists could have foreseen.²⁷ 'Our bodies, minds, families, communities, the environment – all are consumed.'²⁸

Lasn's rejection of the present is expressed as ambivalence about the modern world (even though we may note that his concerns are rather conventional). Lasn reproaches today's crime and fear of crime, the loss of community in which neighbours do not speak to one another, air and water pollution, widespread medical problems; in brief, the 'creeping dysfunction of North American life.'²⁹ Lasn goes on to bemoan the automobile as one of the most destructive inventions ever, destroying communities, harming the environment and adding to a culture of waste through their inbuilt obsolescence. His professed love of driving places him in a dilemma, causing him deep feelings of angst and guilt.³⁰ On the one hand, these concerns are hardly anti-capitalist; and in any case they would be a case of the *social*, rather than the *artistic* critique of capitalism. On the other hand, in the tenor of his emotional outburst, Lasn exhibits romantic anti-capitalist tendencies. Moreover, even the expression of concrete concerns in the manner in which Lasn expresses them bears similarities to earlier Romantics who would graphically depict the depredations of the modern world (most notably heavy industry), but would fail to submit these to systematic analysis in the Marxian mode.³¹ In this sense, Lasn's critique of the consumer society so far is in line with Löwy's conception of romantic anti-capitalism.

Another element of romantic anti-capitalism – the role imagination – is also present, but in a limited sense. There is no attempt to rescue more positive notions of the self or society through the imagination. Instead, for Lasn – as indeed for Debord – the spectacle of commodities *obscures reality*. Lasn thus advocates the smashing of the 'postmodern hall of mirrors' and deliberately rejecting 'cool' (for Lasn, 'cool' is manufactured, commodified conformity).³² Unfortunately, citizens in a consumer society are trapped in a Sisyphean effort to capture cool. The 'culture-jammers' response is to smash these illusions, so that a more liberated, authentic life may be pursued. Joseph Rumbo, in discussing the case of *Adbusters*, usefully draws a contrast between postmodernist attitudes to consumption and the oppositional stance of Lasn's. While both share an anti-institutionalism and a critique of modern progress in general, Lasn diverges from postmodernism in seeking out (and *believing in*) a pre-existing, natural, authentic self. Lasn thus rejects the ludic world of fantasy and escapism that marks the 'postmodern playground'.³³ Rumbo's comparison is useful for us in that it brings out certain ways in which Lasn's anti-consumerism does and does not match up to Löwy's romantic anti-capitalism. Lasn shares with Romanticism a notion of lost authenticity, but does not prize the imagination in the same way. In a way, the realm of the imagination in the romantic worldview is also the realm of *praxis*. What we mean by this is that the imagination can directly furnish the tools with which to act against a society dominated by exchange-value. Löwy explains that, once the romantic anti-capitalist has drawn out the values he seeks from the past, there are three 'avenues' he can pursue: aestheticising the present through the imagination; re-discovering paradise in the present (for example, through flight to an exotic 'other'); or by rebuilding paradise in the future (wherein the imagination serves as a weapon in this struggle).³⁴ Lasn's culture-jamming, such as the tactic of 'subvertising', does make use of the imagination, but this is for instrumental, tactical purposes. Lasn does not bemoan, as did many Romantics, the loss of the 'magic of

²⁷ Lasn (1999), p. 104

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 63

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 60-1

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 82-3

³¹ Of course, even Marx's scientific analyses included some gruesome descriptions of hardship under capitalism (for example in his account of 'The Working Day', *Capital* Vol. 1) which were included, one suspects, for maximum effect. However, this does not detract from the analysis of exploitation. The romantic anti-capitalist typically neglects the latter in favour of emotional and moralised criticisms of capitalism.

³² Lasn (1999), p. xiv

³³ Rumbo (2002), p. 139

³⁴ Löwy & Sayre (1984), p. 57

imagination' in contemporary society. In fact, it is more the opposite: Lasn and the culture jammers are rebelling against the artificial, commodified fantasies conjured by the consumer society, and specifically by the advertising industry. This element of the imagination is also absent in that Lasn, in contrast to the Romanticism Löwy discusses, does not hark back explicitly to a pre-capitalist golden age. Therefore, neither of the three romantic anti-capitalist 'avenues' or 'exits' outlined above match Lasn's approach.

Nonetheless, there is some reference to a non-specific authentic past. Lasn relates an anecdote to the reader about an average postmodern family that goes on a camping holiday. Once away from the 'urban data stream', the family begins to exhibit symptoms of grief, due to withdrawal from the consumer society. This is evidence, for Lasn, that these people have lost a sense of the 'self that feels most authentic' – the one that is in real communion with nature. Indeed, Lasn urges us to no longer conceive of the natural world as external to humanity but instead as an extension of our very bodies.³⁵ He goes on approvingly to cite Theodore Roszak's account of 'separation anxiety' from nature. This is like cutting off blood to an organ: when the 'flow of nature' to people's lives is cut, the spirit dies.³⁶ Lasn's mission is therefore to build a new society out of the old corrupt one in which 'communities, traditions, cultural heritages, sovereignties and whole histories [have been] replaced by barren American monoculture.'³⁷ To emphasise this point, Lasn describes visitors to the United States being struck by the 'horror show of disconnection and anomie' they find there.³⁸

The notion of authenticity also plays itself out for Lasn at the level of the individual subject. Lasn advises readers to break free of the spectacle of the consumer society by honouring one's instincts and expressing anger from 'deep in your gut'. Against conformity, the countercultural 'ad-busting' rebel should not be 'so unthinkingly civil all the time.'³⁹ Lasn's model is the expressive subject, true to itself, acting on instinct, and directly opposing the conformity of bourgeois society. The Romantic worldview is very much in operation here. Lasn later exclaims that 'rage' and 'righteous anger' are 'good', 'immediate', 'compelling' and above all '*real*'.⁴⁰ It is only by being an empowered human being and not a 'hapless consumer drone' that one can dissolve the cynicism of the consumer society.⁴¹ This is essential because a 'free, authentic life is no longer possible in America™ today.'⁴²

Adbusters' content has two foci: the degradation of the natural environment caused by the consumer society, and, more relevant to this investigation, the colonisation of spaces by advertising and marketing.⁴³ The latter is an obvious instance of Boltanski and Chiapello's *artistic critique*: it is an expression of indignation at the inauthenticity and oppression experienced in the consumer society. As noted above, the artistic critique and the romantic anti-capitalist worldview bear important similarities. Indeed, Lasn's *Adbusters* and 'culture-jamming' matches up to the criteria of both romantic anti-capitalism and the artistic critique for a further reason. Insofar as it is 'anti-capitalist', Lasn's critique entirely lacks the dimension of *class* or a working notion of *exploitation*. In elaborating the culture-jammers' relation to the established political Left, Lasn claims that his anti-corporate, anti-consumerist struggle transcends old divisions of left and right, black and white, and male and female (i.e. class politics, the politics of race, and the politics of gender, respectively). Instead, Lasn claims that the 'only battle still worth fighting and winning, the only one that can set us free, is The People versus The Corporate Cool Machine.'⁴⁴ This is why Lasn is a *romantic* anti-capitalist. We can hypothesise at this point that Lasn is perhaps even more wedded to an exclusively 'artistic' critique than was his declared theoretical influence – Guy Debord. The latter, while putting forth a classically *artistic* critique that drew on Dada and Surrealism, also attempted to extend

³⁵ Lasn (1999), pp. 4-6

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xv

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xiii

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xv

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.140; my italics

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. xv

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. xiii

⁴³ Rumbo (2002), p. 138

⁴⁴ Lasn (1999), p. xvi

Marx's concept of the fetishism of commodities. A social critique is present in Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* insofar as the 'spectacle' serves to conceal a 'unity of poverty' in a system of exploitative class relations.⁴⁵ This is absent from Lasn's approach. To cite but one example, the Adbusters Media Foundation's 'Buy Nothing Day' has been criticised for being a flagrant affront to those who are too poor to even participate in the consumer society, much less reject it.⁴⁶ Lasn's is a rebellion against the reification of the consumer society, effects felt within the sphere of consumption. Those excluded from that sphere due to the system of productive relations in capitalism is of no concern to Lasn.

Let us now turn to another case of contemporary anti-consumerism. Gabriel and Lang, in *The Unmanageable Consumer*, frame 'the consumer' in a number of different ways as a means of exploring different aspects of consumerism. Their discussion of the 'Consumer as Activist' is most relevant to us here. The authors note that (anti-)consumer activism is hardly a recent phenomenon, originating with co-operatives in the 19th century. The most recent wave of consumer activism is what they loosely term 'alternative consumption', encompassing green, ethical and single-issue consumer activism. The focus of our investigation being anti-consumerism as a *worldview*, we will not deal with alternative consumption as a whole. Many types of consumer activism are directed towards the achievement of *political* goals (however imprecise), such as ameliorating the conditions of poverty or halting environmental degradation. What we are concerned to explore here is instead a more comprehensive anti-capitalist *worldview*. For this reason we will turn to a specific form of alternative consumption which Amitai Etzioni, a communitarian sociologist, notes is motivated by an articulated philosophy: 'voluntary simplicity'.

Voluntary Simplicity (VS) has experienced a marked rise in adherents since the middle of the 1990s, both in North America and Europe, although figures vary.⁴⁷ While it has roots in post-1960s countercultural movements (and it can be traced further back to the Quakers), most research on VS identifies the conditions leading the recent uptake of VS lifestyles as *particular* to the conditions of the past two decades (which we will discuss below). Unfortunately, there is little theoretical elaboration of the VS philosophy and also limited research into the motivations and worldview of its adherents.⁴⁸ For this reason, in attempting to analyse the VS worldview, some extrapolation will be necessary, both from the work of Duane Elgin – a major proponent – and from academic study of the phenomenon, most of which relies on qualitative surveys of 'voluntary simplifiers'.

The most concise summary of the VS lifestyle is that it promotes a life that is 'outwardly simple, inwardly rich'.⁴⁹ As the name suggests, VS is a reaction to the increasing complexity of the modern consumer society. The reactive character of the movement is especially pronounced today in contrast with earlier periods of its popularity. Previously, voluntary simplifiers were 'pulled' in by the VSM's virtues, whereas today it is the 'push' factor of *stress* that draws in adherents.⁵⁰ Etzioni argues that time-poverty and overwork indicate that modern consumer societies (in particular that of the United States) are returning to an earlier, rawer capitalist age. It is against this to which people are reacting.⁵¹ Elgin, however, sees the VSM as more than simply a reaction to difficulties encountered in modern life; VS is very much a *worldview*.⁵² However, the extent to which VS is a form of romantic anti-capitalism can only be determined by whether its positive values and subjective relation to the past match up to that detailed by Löwy.

Rich Hayes, a UC Berkeley academic and VS adherent explains that voluntary simplifiers value 'moderation over excess, spiritual development over material consumption, cooperation

⁴⁵ Debord (1994), p.41

⁴⁶ Rumbo (2002), pp. 142-3

⁴⁷ See Zavestoski (2002b) and Doherty & Etzioni (2003)

⁴⁸ Zavestoski (2002b)

⁴⁹ Elgin (1981)

⁵⁰ Zavestoski (2002b), p. 152-3

⁵¹ Etzioni (2003), pp.1-3

⁵² See Elgin (2003), p. 164 (Table 9.2) in which the 'Industrial Worldview' is contrasted to the 'VS Worldview'.

over competition, and nature over technology.⁵³ In doing so, the voluntary simplicity movement (VSM) believes VS to be a harbinger of a multitude of shifts, not just in personal, subjective lifestyle values, but in the degree and nature of social consumption, the operation of institutions, and the conduct of national and international politics.⁵⁴ Elgin further cashes out this change in terms of the values of the VS movement: material simplicity, human scale, self-determination, ecological awareness and personal growth.⁵⁵ Let us remind ourselves of the characteristics of romantic anti-capitalism. The notion of the fully developed human subject can be found in VS in the area of 'personal growth'. Here, engagement in the consumer society is seen as mere self-perpetuation – life as merely 'not dying' (as Elgin puts it, paraphrasing Simone de Beauvoir). Instead, VS allows for spiritual and psychological development. The idea of a more authentic life is present in the VSM notion of a 'human scale' world, against the industrial consumerist society which provokes feelings of anonymity, incomprehensibility and artificiality.⁵⁶ Indeed the entire elaboration of the VS lifestyle is based on the perceived inherent (qualitative) values of the lifestyle, in contrast to the industrial worldview which prizes productivity, mechanisation, rationalisation, speed, etc. The romantic anti-capitalist character of the VSM (in particular the emphasis on individual subjectivity and the organic community) is concisely laid out by Elgin in discussing possible future societies. In his preferred one, in which society has undergone a 'humanistic transformation', two ethics will prevail, each one balancing the other. The 'ecological ethic' will mean that man sees himself as integral to the natural environment (unity with nature). The 'self-realisation ethic' impels the development of the fullest human potentiality in community with others (the organic community and the expressive subject).⁵⁷ There could hardly be a more clearly Romantic statement. And yet, several factors mitigate VS's consideration as a form of romantic anti-capitalism.

The first is something that we noted was absent in Lasn's worldview as well – that of an idealised past to which to return. Indeed Elgin (perhaps defensively) renounces any association between VS and a 'back-to-nature' movement.⁵⁸ Many of its adherents are affluent urbanites who alter their consumption and lifestyle choices to reflect 'simplicity'. This need not contradict, however, the Romantic nature of the VS worldview – it simply means that its adherents live with the contradiction between their own mode of life and the values they hold if taken to their logical conclusion. However, something more important challenges the interpretation of VS as romantic anti-capitalist. VS aims to resolve concrete problems through changes to behaviour patterns. The most evident of these is in response to the perceived ecological crisis. Etzioni cites the influential book by Alan Thein Durning, *How Much Is Enough?* (which examined the impact of the consumer society on the natural environment) as putting forward a vision of 'ecological living' that was entirely commensurate with VS.⁵⁹ VS, in this respect, aims to resolve a problem (environmental degradation) through a change in lifestyle, and thus need not be the expression of an oppositional worldview or a critique of bourgeois society. Furthermore, VS is carried out in a very individualised and depoliticised form, such that VS can sometimes be reduced to mere rhetorical lambasting of advertising, condemnation of the immorality of overconsumption and a-political romanticisation of simple living.⁶⁰ In this sense, it is more difficult to construe VS as an antithesis to capitalism, than to see it in terms of what Ronald Inglehart identified as the increasingly 'postmaterialist' attitudes of citizens in developed Western economies. Ethical consumer choices might be influenced by anti-modern attitudes and express a yearning for authentic self-realisation, but these motivations are so individualised and depoliticised that it is difficult to see them as a romantic anti-capitalist worldview.

While nonetheless retaining some romantic anti-capitalist values, VS, in its desire to escape from the complexities of modern life, lacks a certain Romantic tendency that was exhibited in

⁵³ Cited in Maniates (2002), p.199

⁵⁴ Elgin (2003), p.145

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 147

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 148

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 161-2

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.152

⁵⁹ Etzioni (2003), p.22; see Durning (1992)

⁶⁰ Maniates (2002), p. 206

the 1960s. The artistic critique of capitalism classically demanded liberation from oppressive social structures. Shaw and Newholm, in their overview of qualitative studies of ethical consumerism, note that amongst voluntary simplifiers, three overriding motivations are exhibited: restraint, diversity (i.e. a variety of reasons for choosing ethical consumerism), and compulsion (a subjective moral imperative towards integrity).⁶¹ The first and the third are worth remarking upon. Instead of the oppressed subject, yearning for liberation from the constraints of bourgeois conformity, we find instead a more Puritanical notion of self-restraint and moral integrity. Here we have a puzzling contradiction between some evidently Romantic components in the VSM (the full development of the subject; communion with nature; the authentic self; a return to a simpler mode of living) and the espousal of what would otherwise be considered a traditionally capitalist ethos of asceticism and delayed gratification. We will explore this contradiction further in the final section.

For the moment let us examine the final exemplar of contemporary anti-consumerist attitudes: Benjamin Barber's *Consumed*. Barber's is a cultural critique of the consumer society which argues that capitalism today is infused with an ethos of *infantilisation*. As we will see, *Consumed* also presents this investigation with a paradox: Barber directs an attack on the ethos of the consumer society which is very much Romantic in *form*, but then rejects quintessentially Romantic values in the *content* of his criticism, in favour of notions more akin to the Protestant ethos than the liberationist impulse of the counterculture. Barber's contention is that the Protestant ethic which legitimised capitalism for over a century and a half has disappeared. In this sense, he is echoing Daniel Bell's similar analysis in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*.⁶² Barber goes on to argue that this has been replaced by an infantalist ethos which advances a radically different conception of the individual subject – a transformation with grave consequences for society. The Puritanism dominant for more than a century has been replaced by a 'trivialized patina of faux spiritualism and instrumental ethics to rationalize the solipsistic psychology of the new relationship between consumers and commodities required for consumer capitalism to succeed.'⁶³ This new relationship has altered society in such a way that we now live in a world in which everything is permitted. The upshot of this is that nothing is sacred, everything is profane. This is a time of 'age without dignity, dress without formality, sex without reproduction, work without discipline, play without spontaneity, acquisition without purpose, certainty without doubt, life without responsibility, and narcissism into old age and unto death without a hint of wisdom or humility. In the epoch in which we now live, civilization is not an ideal or an aspiration, it is a video game.'⁶⁴ This is a sweeping condemnation of the contemporary conditions in which we find ourselves under capitalism. This is especially remarkable for someone who otherwise seems to believe in the preservation of the capitalist system.⁶⁵

This is an outright rejection of the present, so characteristic of romantic anti-capitalism. Indeed, Barber seizes on the apparent meaningless, trite character of today's culture and the lack of virtue that accompanies it. A romantic anti-capitalist element can also be discerned in Barber's discussion of the *totalising* nature of consumer capitalism. Although Barber consciously rejects the analysis of an earlier romantic anti-capitalist and critic of the consumer society, Herbert Marcuse, in declining the use of the terms 'totalitarian' and 'false consciousness', he nevertheless adopts a similar phrasing. The consumer society does not (as against its neoliberal enthusiasts) promote freedom (at least in the sense of public, moral or civic freedom); but nor are citizens afflicted by false consciousness. Rather what is in

⁶¹ Shaw & Newholm (2002), p.181

⁶² Bell (1996)

⁶³ Barber (2007), p. 48

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7. Whether deliberate or not, Barber's phrasing here echoes Rousseau's critique of the hypocrisy of civilisation in his *Discourse on Inequality*: 'in the midst of so much philosophy, humanity, civilisation, sublime morality, we have nothing but deceitful and frivolous appearances, honour without virtue, reason without wisdom, and pleasure without happiness'. Cited in Berman (1970), p. 152

⁶⁵ See for example his stated desire, in the final chapter on remedies to the system, that capitalism be reformed such that it gears itself towards the satisfaction of the 'real needs' of one half of the world (the developing world) instead of the manufactured needs of affluent consumers. Barber (2007), p. 290

operation is a form of 'limited consciousness'. Barber does not go on to explain the distinction between himself and Marcuse.⁶⁶ Indeed, all the while deriding Marcuse's 'excesses', Barber endorses many of the ideas presented in *One-Dimensional Man*.⁶⁷ Consumerism for Barber (with its agents, the marketing and advertising industries) robs true liberty of its civic meaning and threatens a pluralistic society's vitality. This is done through the homogenising effect of the market (such that 'the mall has become America'⁶⁸) as well as through the obliteration of the 'public' and the 'private', the obfuscation of the distinction between public 'needs' and individual 'wants'. This process encourages the defining facet of the infantilised consumer society: 'civic schizophrenia'.⁶⁹

'Civic schizophrenia' refers to a contradiction in the culture of consumerist societies wherein 'we sow as individuals what we would not necessarily choose to reap as a community'.⁷⁰ This is a direct consequence of the ideology of liberalism which 'has as its true purpose the liberation of the body from public goods in the name of subordinating the soul to the selling of endless private commodities'.⁷¹ However, this is a feature of capitalism in general. Barber is specifically bemoaning the change to a new *infantilised* version of capitalism. Barber explains that today, first order desires (what we want to want) are seen as the only legitimate realm of choosing, at the expense of second order desires (what we actually want), which often refer to *public* goods. This is a degenerate form of capitalism. Barber claims that 'for the first time in history, a society has felt its economic survival demands a kind of controlled regression, a culture that promotes puerility rather than maturation'.⁷²

Let us explore Barber's thought a little further, under the same categories as used above to assess *Adbusters'* and the VSM's romantic characteristics. We can see that Barber exhibits certain romantic tendencies, such as the elaboration of a different, fuller concept of the human subject, but that the characteristics of this human subject are different from the liberated and authentic one championed by Marcuse and the romantic rebels of the 1960s, as discussed by Berman. The human subject (and citizen) today is subverted by marketing and advertising in the attempt to create 'lifelong brand identity' at the expense of a pre-existing pluralistic human identity. The formal freedom of the market leads individuals to seek to 'make the market their own', but this only results in individuals being dominated *by* the market. Barber explains the contradiction between the apparent freedom of shopping and its constraining nature in reality by using the metaphor of a monkey trap. The monkey will reach for bait through a hole in the trap, but will not be able to retrieve it because the hole into which the monkey has reached is not big enough to fit a clenched fist. Rather than release the bait and go free, the monkey will keep holding onto it until the monkey dies. For Barber, the infantilised consumer acts in a similar fashion: 'consumers are capitalism's one-trick monkeys, free in theory to shop or not', but in reality impelled to do so by the contemporary infantilist ethos.⁷³

Barber explains the nature of the infantilist ethos by reference to several simple dyads: fast/slow, easy/difficult, etc. The infantilised consumer always selects the former, driven as it is by narcissistic urges toward instant self-gratification. However, the countervailing notion of the subject championed by Barber is not simply the diametrical opposite. Rather it is symbolised by the dialectical transcendence of these simple dyads. It is the infantilised subject who remains mired in simple choices such as easy versus difficult (in which the former is obviously superior, because more immediately pleasurable). The adult citizen chooses differently. Thus the adult counterpart to childish anarchic liberation is not authoritarian repression, but *moral autonomy*.⁷⁴ Here we can begin to see that Barber's critique diverges from the existing artistic critique of capitalism.

⁶⁶ Barber (2007), p. 52

⁶⁷ Marcuse (1991)

⁶⁸ Barber (2007), p. 220

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.216

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.19

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.125

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 111

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.52

⁷⁴ See Barber (2007), pp. 81-115

As Barber's goal is the 'restoration of a healthy pluralism in which human values are multiple and material consumption but one in a cornucopia of human behaviours', he believes that some strategies for resisting consumerism are possible. He discusses cultural creolisation, cultural carnivalisation and culture-jamming as 'negative' strategies, and corporate citizenship and civic consumerism as positive strategies. This all forms part of what Barber calls 'civic therapy': a redressing of the public-private balance, the restoration of capitalism to its primary role of meeting needs, and the restoration of the democratic public as sovereign regulator.⁷⁵ Suddenly, and in spite of Barber's disgusted rhetoric at the degraded society he sees around him, Barber puts forward proposals that are hardly very radical. Surely this is not a form of romantic anti-capitalism? In one sense, Barber's reformist approach need not disqualify him as a romantic anti-capitalist, given that elements of his critique touch on essentially romantic themes, such as the degraded subject under capitalism and the loss of meaning inherent in that. Löwy outlines a typology of six forms of romantic anti-capitalism, of which one, 'liberal romantic anti-capitalism', best fits Barber's critique. Löwy acknowledges this is a seeming contradiction in terms: classic liberalism is surely the best exemplar of the rationalistic spirit of capitalism against which the Romantics rebelled. Yet liberal romantic anti-capitalism is an actually existing worldview, arising from the contradiction that Romanticism attacks: the contradiction between the atomised self-seeking individual actor in the market and the full development of the subject immanent (but repressed) in capitalism. Liberal romantic anti-capitalism, Löwy claims, is therefore based on misunderstanding; namely, that through moral or civic reform, certain Romantic values can be maintained in a liberal capitalist society. Löwy goes on to explain that here Romanticism comes so near to its opposite, that it risks becoming subsumed by it.⁷⁶ This may go some way to explaining the difficulty we may have in categorising Barber's *Consumed*, despite some Romantic themes being in evidence.

However, there is a much more important reason for this ambiguity. The values which Barber champions in direct opposition the contemporary ethos of capitalism (*viz.* infantilism) are *not Romantic*. In fact, the concept of the subject he reaches for is that of the mature, civic-minded, responsible adult. This is a glaring contrast to earlier Romantic notions of the authentic individual, simultaneously liberated from tradition and from the strictures of the market; the no-longer-alienated subject, fully in harmony with both nature and the organic community. Barber concedes that the opposite of the infantilised subject which he so derides might seem rigid and Puritanical.⁷⁷ This is revealing: Barber is attacking contemporary consumer culture in a form that resembles the romantic anti-capitalist – contrasting the disenchantment of today with the virtues of the past. Yet the past to which Barber is reaching is quite recent; albeit one predating the neoliberal offensive and the explosion of consumerism (and in particular the expansion in the advertising and marketing industries). Where does this leave Barber's critique with regard to romantic anti-capitalism? Do we not find with Barber that 'what is rejected in capitalism is the exact antithesis of the values that are sought because they have been lost'?⁷⁸ Indeed, Barber champions values that have been lost, ones that were present in an earlier period, in a sometimes quite emotional rhetoric echoing Romantic rejections of contemporary society. And yet the values retrieved are from a recent (still very much capitalist) past; further, they are values which are more akin to an earlier spirit of capitalism – that of the Protestant ethic – than of a mythical pre-capitalist golden age. We shall attempt to account for this below.

Why does contemporary anti-consumerism not entirely fit the mould of romantic anti-capitalism?

We have seen here that none of the three cases of contemporary anti-consumerism entirely match up to Löwy and Sayre's definition of romantic anti-capitalism. Lasn most closely approximates it, but lacks a definite past to which to refer. This is a shortcoming (insofar as romantic anti-capitalism is concerned) shared by the VSM and Barber's critique of the infantalist

⁷⁵ Barber (2007), p. 261

⁷⁶ Löwy & Sayre (1984), pp. 75-76

⁷⁷ Barber (2007), p. 90

⁷⁸ Löwy & Sayre (1984), p. 59

spirit of capitalism. The latter two also seemingly diverge from Romantic notions in that they champion an ethos which either promotes simplicity and self-restraint (VS) or mature civic engagement and responsibility (Barber). How are we to explain this? If we hold to the view that romantic anti-capitalism is a recurring phenomenon, and that anti-consumerist attitudes are widespread today (even if consumption itself keeps expanding), then one would expect the anti-consumerism to exhibit strong characteristics of romantic anti-capitalism. The reason for this lies in the fact that anti-consumerism conceives of its political activity as operating purely in the realm of consumption; that is, in the realm of *culture*. If critique restricts itself to this sphere, it can only take the form of an *artistic* critique of capitalism. As we have explained, social critique concerns itself primarily with exploitation. The premise on which the contemporary politics of consumption is founded is the *naturalisation of the surplus* and therefore the end of conflict over production. While this (along with mass affluence) allowed for the 'hippy revolt' of the 1960s, the trend towards 'dematerialisation' and 'depoliticisation' has been furthered to a much greater extent. Anti-consumerism expresses that trend today, by engaging in an exclusively artistic critique (which most varieties of romantic anti-capitalism normally are), and therefore will not disturb the fundamental organisation of society, *viz.* capitalism. That being said, the contradiction alluded to above has still not been resolved: why is today's anti-consumerism not entirely satisfactory as a form of romantic anti-capitalism, just when one would expect the return of such attitudes?

This conundrum can be explained by reference to Boltanski and Chiapello's account of the *incorporation* of the artistic critique by capitalism since the 1960s. The authors explain that the process by which capitalism transforms itself into new 'spirits' comes as a result of 'tests'. Put simply, when confronted with critique, capitalism can either transform itself into a new spirit, incorporate some of the positive values of the critique, but without restructuring, or simply 'cloud the issue'.⁷⁹ The critique of inauthenticity advanced against what the authors see as the first spirit of capitalism attacked the conventions and manners of bourgeois morality. The second spirit, lasting from early in the twentieth century to the 1960s, was attacked on the grounds of its standardisation and massification. This latter critique was taken seriously by capitalism in the formulation of the third spirit, emerging from the 1960s.⁸⁰ The 1960s counterculture forced a new spirit of capitalism, into which was incorporated the demands for liberation, autonomy and authenticity. This process has of course not challenged capitalism in any significant manner – that is to say, the system of productive relations remain much as they always were – but it has meant that 'authenticity' and 'liberation' have been entirely commodified. Indeed, this has been a boon to consumer capitalism. The demand to 'be oneself', the individual drive for distinction which marked the counterculture, is also, according to Bourdieu, a prime component of the drive for consumerism. Hence, after the 1960s we can observe an increasing differentiation in the market of goods, allowing for the individual self-realisation, as sought by the counterculture, to be actualised through consumption. This prompts Boltanski and Chiapello to ask rhetorically if the new spirit of capitalism, 'while incorporating whole sections of the artistic critique and subordinating it to profit-making, have not emptied the demands for liberation and authenticity of what gave them substance...?'⁸¹

How does this relate to our task at hand? As noted, Lasn's critique is the most classically 'Romantic' of the three cases of anti-consumerism examined herein. Rather than his critique attacking massification as such, he is very much in line with the rebels of the 1960s in denouncing the artifice of consumerist capitalism. Yet as anti-capitalism, this critique falls flat today. In part this is due, as Boltanski and Chiapello explain, to the radical deconstruction of the exigency of 'authenticity' today, as found in postmodernism. In the 'connexionist' world, Lasn's resistance to conformity goes hand-in-hand with the spirit of the age. This is indicative of the simultaneous *success* and *failure* of the artistic critique of the 1960s. It has been a success in terms of its full acceptance throughout society, now finding most clear expression amongst its adherents in the media; it has been a failure in that it did not end capitalism – rather, the artistic critique ignored the complicity of *desire* with *capital* and thus the (degraded) meaning of 'freedom' in this context.⁸² Indeed, it is Colin Campbell's thesis in *The Romantic*

⁷⁹ Boltanski & Chiapello (2005), pp. 28-9

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 438

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 419-20

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 466-7

Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism that the Bohemian need to flout convention (as expressed in the counterculture), and the Romanticism underpinning it, supplies the dynamic for modern consumerism. Romanticism, in Campbell's words, 'has served to provide ethical support for that restless and continuous pattern of consumption which so distinguishes the behaviour of modern man'.⁸³ Indeed, modern consumerism, which Campbell calls 'self-illusory hedonism' is characterised by a desire to experience in reality that dreamed up in the imagination. No wonder, then, that the romantic anti-capitalism of Marcuse, Debord and others has been so easily incorporated into a new spirit of capitalism in which the virtues of 'flexibility' in the workplace and self-discovery and self-realisation in the marketplace through consumption are extolled.

One response to this incorporation of the artistic critique today is the option of futility: to continue with the nineteenth century denunciation of bourgeois morality (oblivious to the lack of real opponents) and attack the media conspiracy for perpetuating the consumer culture (which the media laps up and sells this back to the audience as commodified chatter). Lasn's *Adbusters* fits this approach rather closely. For Boltanski and Chiapello, an heir to the 1960s such as Lasn must 'invent enemies, or credit remaining enemies with a power they have long since lost', for their critique to retain even a little purchase.⁸⁴ In a sense, then, Lasn is rebelling against a void. The authors identify two further avenues for the artistic critique – both of which bear some similarities to the critique of the VSM and of Barber. One is to denounce the contemporary world as nihilistic and valueless and retreat into a reverie of lost community. The other is to challenge the social deracination evident today by defending old collectivities and engaging in a process of 'slowing down', of delaying gratification, etc. An associated strategy is to attempt to restrict commodification into other areas by challenging the immorality of the commodification of previously untouched areas of the 'lifeworld' – areas that should not be 'denatured'. Both these elements, though especially the latter, is evident in the VSM.

This, however, still leaves us with the question with which we first began: is contemporary anti-consumerism a form of romantic anti-capitalism? The anti-consumerism represented by Lasn and *Adbusters* certainly seems to be. Yet that critique lacks any force in a world in which 'everything is permitted' (within the boundaries of the ever-expanding market). Furthermore, if romantic anti-capitalism is understood as an un-dialectical critique in which the capitalist present is rejected outright and the positive values advanced are those diametrically opposed to the contemporary spirit of capitalism, Lasn fails as romantic anti-capitalism. That is to say, the co-optation of his critique indicates that his values, *pace* anti-commodification, are very much in tune with 'bourgeois society' (if one can still call it that).⁸⁵

Conversely, the VSM – in their championing of restraint, and Barber – in his critique of infantilisation and of the ludic anarchy of contemporary consumerism, are much less in line with conventional definitions of Romanticism, in particular when compared to the 1960s countercultural demands for liberation. And yet, in placing themselves in direct opposition to contemporary capitalism and even going so far as to champion more conservative values of restraint and morality, they fit the mode of romantic opposition to capitalism more closely. Is this then what Thomas C Oden means when he calls Romanticism 'tradition against tradition'?⁸⁶ Duane Elgin for example, refers to the unsustainable 'traditional' way of life

⁸³ Campbell (1987), p. 201; Campbell sees the Romantic ethic as co-existing with the Protestant ethic, each providing impetus for a different realm (consumption and production, respectively).

⁸⁴ Boltanski & Chiapello (2005), p. 467

⁸⁵ This question of co-optation is important. For Campbell, the Romantic drive behind consumerism must be seen as *ironic*, and not intentional (a Weberian 'negative irony', in which an idea works against its original meaning, thereby destroying it). There is something cynical in this co-optation of course (which anti-capitalists critique, but thus far to no effect). This cynicism is commented upon by Baudrillard. For him, the consumer society is *objectively* cynical. All the waste, nuisance and poverty are not unfortunate by-products of that society, but are necessary concomitants of the 'affluence' of the consumer society. Baudrillard (1998), p. 42

⁸⁶ Cited in Campbell (1987), p. 219

(consumer capitalism) in contrast to his proposals for voluntary simplicity – lifestyles which by any other definition would be considered more ‘traditional’ than consumer society.⁸⁷ Barber claims infantilisation is a sort of pathology – of not overcoming a childish lack of autonomy and judgment. He sees this as not being ‘civilised’, in contrast to earlier periods of capitalism. Here we can see another case of ‘tradition against tradition’. Whereas the first Romantics contrasted authentic *Kultur* against deracinated *Zivilisation*, Barber champions the lost virtues of civilisation.⁸⁸ This is placed in opposition to the sexual *id* of contemporary consumer capitalism which today lacks the civilisational superego to constrain it. Although for Barber, consumerist capitalism doesn’t despise civilisation, it *is* indifferent to it.⁸⁹ We therefore see that romantic anti-capitalism today – capitalism’s ‘legitimate antithesis’ – must take one of two routes: either hark back to a more Puritanical past in which ascetic values such as austerity triumphed (and thereby diverge quite radically from Romanticism as conventionally understood); or repeat the critique of the 1960s *ad infinitum*, to no effect, only retaining its oppositional character in the minds of its adherents.

Conclusion

In posing the question of whether contemporary anti-consumerism is a form of romantic anti-capitalism, we have tried to achieve two objectives. The first was to take up the challenge implicitly made in Michael Löwy’s work on romantic anti-capitalism; namely, that if romantic anti-capitalism is a universal, recurring phenomenon throughout capitalist modernity, we should therefore expect to find it in contemporary society in one form or another. We have attempted to discover this in contemporary anti-consumerism. The answer, as we have just seen, is ambiguous. The second objective was an examination of the content of anti-consumerism in the hope that it would reveal something about the nature of capitalism today and that of its critics. It was the premise of this investigation that there is a dialectic through modernity of bourgeois society and its Romantic critics. What we have suggested is that contemporary capitalism has internalised many of the Romantic criticisms made of it in the past decades. Bourgeois society is therefore not what it once was.

Daniel Bell argued thirty years ago that there is a cultural contradiction of capitalism, in which the Protestant ethic which dominates the economic sphere is in conflict with the values of the cultural sphere.⁹⁰ The latter had for been dominated by Modernism for nearly a century, an outlook whose values, inherited from Romanticism, were always directly at odds with the mores of bourgeois society. Further, there was a contradiction even *within* the economic realm, between the asceticism and self-denial of the realm of production and the hedonism of the realm of consumption. With the massification of culture, Modernist values passed over into the *culturati*, who maintained the adversary stance against bourgeois orderliness and sobriety.⁹¹ This was so much the case that by the 1960s, this adversary stance was thoroughly mainstream; heterodoxy had become conformist. The Romantic rebels of the 1960s were therefore pushing at an open door, traditional bourgeois society having already been dismantled from the inside. The legacy of that revolt has been the wholesale incorporation of the values of self-expression into the edifices of capitalism itself.⁹²

Does this crisis of bourgeois society mean that the dialectic of Romanticism and rationalistic capitalist values has come to a close? This should be the subject of further investigation. As noted above, romantic anti-capitalism has remained an underused concept because it does not neatly fit amongst more conventional ideological categories. This is precisely why it is useful. One may posit that it will become even more useful in the future. As the political left and right become increasingly alienated from their own political traditions, new forms politics

⁸⁷ Elgin (2003), *passim*.

⁸⁸ Barber (2007), p. 35

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 130

⁹⁰ Bell (1996)

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. xxv

⁹² See Illouz (2007) on the making of ‘emotional capitalism’.

may emerge.⁹³ The category of romantic anti-capitalism will become increasingly relevant as disgruntlement with the current state of affairs mounts, but in the absence of a credible revolutionary alternative. Furthermore, as the sphere of consumption continues to dominate the political imagination, we can expect that oppositional movements will emerge as actors in this field. By necessity, they will be restricted to an artistic critique of capitalism, not being able to question the system of exploitative class relations that operate at the level of *production*.

As stated at the outset, capitalism always produces its critics. Anti-consumerism is an instance of this, and yet insufficient research has been done on anti-consumerist attitudes today, both that found at the margins as well as in the mainstream. This is an area which should be further explored. One way of attempting to better understand anti-consumerism today would be through the pursuit of a sociology of the Romantic intelligentsia. Löwy outlines a sociology of the radical intelligentsia in a study on Lukács' intellectual and political development, in which he explains that romantic anti-capitalism is most often found amongst the small bourgeoisie, and in particular within a social category comprised of those whose occupations are most at odds with a world dominated by exchange-value: teachers, professors, artists, and so on.⁹⁴ One may speculate that today's romantic anti-capitalists are to be found amongst a social category in a similar position: those members of the middle class who are neither exploited nor exploiters, but who have instead renounced work in profit-making enterprises in favour of employment in the third sector, amongst NGOs and charities. This may be a fruitful area of future research.

This belief that new forms of romantic anti-capitalism should be better understood is partly derived from a conviction that it must be appropriately *critiqued*. While the artistic critique of capitalism is no doubt valuable, we have argued here that it has largely been incorporated into the new spirit of capitalism. We must rejoin the battle for a critique of capitalism in its totality. Romantic anti-capitalism is profoundly un-dialectical – it is an abstract negation of capitalism. We should instead mobilise indignation towards a more dialectical critique of capitalism, an *Aufhebung* absent from romantic anti-capitalism.

⁹³ See Furedi (1992) for a discussion of the process of 'objectification' of history in the past couple of decades. This process has left much of society with an intense suspicion of change. As a consequence, 'left' and 'right' have lost their essential meanings, derived as these were from their respective approaches to *history* and *change*. Furedi argues we live in a time of 'presentism' such that we neither have a sense of the past nor of an achievable future. This approach may in part explain why contemporary movements which we would expect to exhibit clearly romantic characteristics fail to do so: they are unable to *imagine* a *different past* and project it into the *future* and so lack the critical force of earlier Romantics.

⁹⁴ Löwy (1979), Part I, esp. pp. 15-22

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