

BOOK REVIEWS

Translated version

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF CONSUMPTION IN THE CONTEMPORARY CAPITALIST SOCIETY?

CULTURA DO CONSUMO. Fundamentos e formas contemporâneas.

Isleide Arruda Fontenelle. Rio de Janeiro, RJ: Editora FGV, 2017. 220 p.

How can one explain the role of consumption in the contemporary capitalist society from a more holistic view compared to the one usually taught in business schools? This is the ambitious goal that Professor Isleide Fontenelle, PhD, aims to reach in the book *Cultura do consumo: Fundamentos e formas contemporâneas*. Building on her career as a researcher and professor of this subject at the Fundação Getúlio Vargas, the author summarized 150 years of history of the relationship between consumption and capitalism, and proposed two main theoretical axes underpinning it.

Fontenelle considers the studies on marketing, advertising, and consumer behavior as part of the object of analysis, and not as a field of research as such. She goes beyond the more traditional approach of the *Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)*, which seeks to understand the consumers' choices and behaviors not only from economic and psychological standpoints, but also from a sociocultural one. The book is ambitious because it links these two perspectives. Moreover, it considers the fields of marketing, advertising, and consumer behavior as object of analysis, using theoretical foundations of economics and psychology/psychoanalysis to explain the framework of the contemporary capitalist society.

Even though the book is composed of five chapters, the author's intention in dividing her work into two major parts is clear. The first one (chapters I to III) covers almost two thirds of the work, conducting a retrospective study of nearly 150 years of changes in capitalism and consumption. Fontenelle adopted a subdivision of its own despite being inspired by reference authors. She divides this story into three stages: foundations of consumer culture (1880–1945); consolidation of consumer culture (1945–1990); and contemporaneity (1990 to present). The first part of the book offers a more descriptive character without deepening the theoretical aspect. The second part of the book (chapters IV and V) provides a deeper theoretical perspective, summarizing the historical development of capitalism and consumption into two theoretical perspectives.

Chapter I (Fundamentals) constitutes what the author calls the first phase of consumer culture, spanning 1880 to 1945. This stage results from two key historical movements, one economic, the Industrial Revolution, and the other political, the



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French Revolution. Together, these movements paved the way for the so-called “modern age,” and consequently the “modern individual.” The Industrial Revolution was essential for two reasons: it increased the amount of goods produced that needed to be sold and laid the foundations of a type of consumption that works in a different way in capitalism than other modes of production: the consumption of commodities. Commodities, in the capitalist system, may take different forms and suffer resignification in comparison to their original form. That means they can satisfy more extensive needs than those foreseen for when it was produced. The French Revolution was key to supporting this new role of goods in the capitalist system, since it established new possibilities of social mobility, enabling individuals to be freer in their identity choices. Therefore, the consumption of commodities was not associated with a historical sense of destruction. However, it gained new positive meanings, sustaining a world of freedom and individual expression.

Several other social changes occurred due to which such transformation in the meaning of consumption could happen and the capitalist system could expand. For instance, there were improvements in urbanization, transport, communication and distribution systems, creation of department stores and consumer credit, acceleration of commodities life cycle and, most importantly, the creation of public relations (PR), marketing, advertising, and market research. It is possible that some readers disagree of the separation made by the author regarding the roles of marketing, PR, and advertising. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that they generally helped build the foundations of the contemporary capitalism.

Chapter II depicts the consolidation of consumer culture, between 1945 and 1990. One of the most remarkable features of this period is the abundance and the subsequent pursuit of differentiation of commodities by changing their image. For that to happen, market research, commercials (advertising), and branding (brand management) were essential to the consumption management, since production management had already been solved. The chapter presents more examples of how companies have managed investments in their image, besides a theoretical analysis of the subject.

Chapter III (Contemporary Forms of Consumption) examines how the culture of consumption has been reinventing itself from two central events -- the new information technologies and the environmental crisis. The author summarizes recent changes in two large “forms”: “consumption of experiences” (or hedonic consumption) and “responsible consumption.” The first reflects

the companies’ efforts to go beyond the satisfaction of utilitarian needs, that is, providing the consumption of experiences. The consumption of experiences is based on the notion that we are going through the passage of a buy-and-sell economy to an access economy. The responsible consumption is anchored in the environmental, social or individual implications of the act of consuming. That is, it is a reaction to the exacerbated, predatory consumerism that prevailed throughout the greater part of capitalism.

The highlight of the book for readers with a more academic profile will probably be chapter IV, since the fifth and last chapter provides only a summary of work. It is in Chapter IV that Fontenelle gets more theoretical and less descriptive about the culture of consumption. She summarizes this culture in two connected theoretical foundations: the Theory of Capitalism and Theory of Passions. The Theory of Capitalism is based on the notion that there is a central economic axis in the culture of consumption. That is, to understand the operation of the capitalist system is to understand the culture of consumption, especially that the essence of this system is the production of surplus capital and its continuous expansion. According to the Theory of Passions, the selling of commodities and the permanent expansion of capital can only occur through the mobilization of human “passions”. That is, people need to renew their consumer desires constantly. To support her argument, the author investigates main theorists of capitalism and psychology/psychoanalysis, associating the two theoretical aspects.

The book is ambitious because it tries to describe the culture of consumption in about 200 pages. Obviously, such limited space in terms of pages would not allow a thorough analysis, which does not mean that the book does not have virtues. It has several. First, it is a good source for a reader who wants to have a coherent glimpse of a complex historical process. Second, it features a relevant set of works and reference authors for those who want to deepen their understanding of consumption, either in its historical, economical, and psychological/psychoanalytical contexts. Third, it is a well-written, organized, and structured book, providing the reader with a pleasant, didactic experience of traveling in time to understand the world of consumption. The book stands out for its more “horizontal” than “vertical” view on the culture of consumption. That is, a reader who is new to the subject may possibly be satisfied with the approach. However, it is likely that readers who have already been initiated will consider the book shallow in some points.