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Markets, Globalization & Development Review



‘Coronated’ Consumption in the Viral Market

Exposure

We now are exposed – and will be again – to more biological, economic, and socio-politico-cultural unknowns. We will writhe with the current state of mortality for a more extended period than we can collectively visualize on graphs and charts. Statistical descriptions of the startling menace to humanity have become popularized among the public but soon set aside and ignored by too many, resulting in sudden spikes in the displays of the global torment. Notwithstanding the absence of an acute and scrupulous future projection, the current agony reveals some inconvenient realities. Our initial exposure to the ominous bug COVID-19 has brought about other collateral exposures. There will surely be more, conceivably grimmer ones.

As individuals, we are exposed mainly to the nothingness of the mundane to which we cling; humanity is exposed to an epochal transition between *being* human (BC: before coronavirus) and *recognizing* human (AC: after coronavirus). Leadership at all levels is exposed to the calamity and to the public that craves to point a colossal, atrocious finger at *someone*; democracy is exposed to a series of actions and practices that simulate ochlocracy – forms of mob rule – at best. The education system is exposed to a self-casted incantation, uttering, “Rigor, efficiency, and student experience,” whereas environmentalism is exposed to the unforeseen, yet ostensibly farcical, divide between green and clean (disinfected). Most gravely, the market is exposed to the unsolicited and unnerving hiatus of a critical human activity—production/consumption—which can only intensify all the aforementioned exposures.

Idling

When, due to various exposures, everything reshapes, from what they used to mean in the market, consumers also are destined to be exposed to the deprivation of “things-to-do”. This involuntary idleness psychologically and culturally troubles consumers because it is generally recognized that *idle* connotes lazy, wasteful, and even sinful (Russell 1958). Such psychoanalytic diagnoses of non-*busyness*, however, may no longer be a fair assessment of the current mode of being. Idleness is no longer slothfulness – it is an enforced state. The separation between work and rest has become blurry because of being unemployed or working remotely. The consequence is that entitlement to leisure after or before

work is now an antediluvian mentality. The reduced or absent leisure time inevitably brings the Veblenian account into the discussion of class consciousness in the world in and after this pandemic (c.f., Veblen and Chase 1934). The actual and perceived social stratification deeply ingrained in the practice of consumption in late modernity may have to be reconfigured or a brilliant neologism is urgently desired for new social classes to evolve.

In the presence of universal alienation, consumption cannot be as conspicuous as before, which essentially signifies the demise of status symbols in the traditional sense. Values and practices that signaled opulence conspicuousness will be replaced by practices and modes pertaining to less or inconspicuous consumption and lifestyles – generosity, altruism, mental (psychological) wellness, new aesthetics, and financial wellbeing (Danziger 2020; Singer 2020). Uploading photos of luxury items to social media platforms may not be effective enough to stop the sociocultural system from redefining and rearranging social classes (Reich 2020). When leisure equates to destructing market value and accumulated wealth, the current market system cannot function properly to provide sufficient value and wealth for each social class to remain a leisure class. When the traditional dedication to *busyness* (and business) and the protestant work ethic together become the synonym for pointlessness, consumption is no longer a passage to redemption. Rather, it is now felt as daydreaming. The right to reject work – the quintessence of leisure – has been dispossessed not by the system but by the virus. This particular loss nonetheless can be seen as an opportunity for self-improvement and enhanced productivity for both individuals and the market. Production will no longer be based solely on labor in the market, in the sense that the modern market system is the only platform (or iron cage, for Weber) that ensures productivity, efficiency, control, and innovation.

One might then ask which aspect of our lives can be improved by the unorthodox productivity drawn from individuals who are laid-off, furloughed, or left with extra time saved by not commuting. It is possible to imagine the reduced, if not totally lost, leisure time can be reallocated to reimagine aesthetics (see, e.g., Firat and Dholakia 2017). Paradoxes in the market system have been less palpable than what we see in the current and the future market, namely the reversibility of leisure and production (see Dholakia and Firat 2019). We have witnessed the burgeoning of a new entertainment system full of “heretical” celebrities on YouTube. Artists were perceived by many and by themselves as individuals who live on the margins of capitalist market society if they are

not “sell-outs” or appropriated by the system. The paradox here is multi-layered and multi-faceted. Artists, creators, and entertainers have moved to the center of capitalism, and we will continue to see the grassroots, rhizomatic growth and expansion into unconventional areas of aesthetics (see Deleuze and Guattari 1988).

Idleness as an anathema to neoliberalism used to entail disconnection and isolation, but it now can mean hyper-connectivity and hyper-activity, which are the very qualities the ideology promotes. Neo-consumption, post-consumption, trans-consumption, or consumption 2.0 (whichever best suits the description) in these uncertain times may take forms similar to nostalgic marketing and hyper-personalization, but they can be palpably bleak and solipsistic. Not only the reduced leisure time, but also the shortage of entertainment from the culture industry (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972 [2007]) that had offered movies, live concerts, sporting events, travel, and dining will further alienate consumers in the world of connectedness. Consumers will sense varied degrees of urgency to be re-connected. As a result, media consumption may skyrocket. The media consumption forms, however, will inherit little, if any, properties from the culture industry that used to homogenize meanings and aesthetics and imperceptibly (but long-lastingly) intoxicate the public. Social media will become truly social in the sense that sensationalizing, playfulness, and bragging about food eaten, clothes worn, activities done, and places visited will have a very small place to be. In their stead, more intimate and individualized conversations will promote development of narrowcasted, meaningful interactions and communities on social media (briefly explored in some MGDG special issues and articles, see, e.g., Üçok and Houston 2018; Boje and Hillon 2017). Many consumers will try to recover from the toxic aftermath of feel-good media consumption and attempt to “re-enchant” the heartless and yet alluring media world.

Risk: A Manufactured Uncertainty

The market in modernity — with some inescapable shortcomings — had shown its capacity to integrate opposing views, distinctive expectations, multiple actors, a myriad of technologies, diverse cultures, and even different time and space into iconic brands and irresistible symbols for sale. It is still expected to perform the same role of creating, connecting, continuing, and congregating. At this accidental juncture in history, however, a non-human actor (virus) — that had been nonexistent (or at least overlooked) — enrolls into the market system, a restless network. The corollary is an implosion wherein consumers — as the most attractive host

for viral brands, trends, and products — have started underperforming (albeit unintentionally) for the market, and the market has become the greatest Petri dish in which to culture ‘risk’ and ‘fear’.

As Beck (1992) articulated in his notion of risk society, less- or uncontrollable natural disasters and pandemics pose imminent threats to late modern society, exacerbating the level of insecurity among the populace. Science and expertise both face criticism and cynicism due to the perceived lack, if not complete absence, of practical solutions. Amid this pandemic, the market is only to promulgate the neoliberal responsabilization (Giesler and Veresiu 2014; see also Dholakia, Ozgun and Atik 2020) that binds individuals to wellness-oriented self-care practices. The market system has never been designed to provide a guidance or solution for the life-or-death decision-making processes the mass of humanity is currently undergoing. It is a market failure in which all must rely on authorities and experts, whom they quickly question and blame. The market, authorities, and experts must then redirect the conversation to the social and ethical aspects of everyday practices as though everything in and of the plague is caused by individual and small-group decisions and behaviors. Most, if not all, decisions and subsequent implementations become products of ad-hocism, which further destabilizes the already-precarious relationships between the public and whoever is in charge at different levels and areas.

Scientitized risks and their management create an area where most individuals cannot possibly comprehend and therefore fail to internalize the systematic risk-management practices (i.e., face coverings and social distancing). It is a “tragic individualization” at the current techno-medical turn in history. Survival has become purely personal, and no one but oneself can increase the odds. Neoliberal optimization of the self has truly become the mantra of the time, and the privatization of the public sectors dismantles the market landscape where the private and public intersect. Public hospitals and healthcare sites had already been privatized if the locations were deemed lucrative, and many of us have paid the price for the relentless market logic during this time of perplexity and indecision (see, e.g., Dholakia, Firat and Dholakia 2018).

Because there is no political gain in preventing disaster from happening, governments try to manage it when it blows hard on our everyday lives. We have been living in a constant state of precarity for some time (see, e.g., Standing 2011), but the market has somehow always magically reinvigorated the social and the cultural, which has made the market the grand symbol of the past, the current, and the future human destination. This symbol, however, now is contested and

scrutinized – in search for the authentic motive to better humanity. As consumers, consequently, we see an increasing range of dreadful things happening in the market:

- Stock and real estate markets behave based on ever more opportunistic intentions
- Brands tune in to embellish their images with humanitarianism
- Retailers in general operate on their own cost-benefit analyses even though they understand the cost undeniably entails human lives (Amazon, a retailer that gained massively during the pandemic, was accused of endangering worker safety in its relentlessly efficient distribution centers)
- Higher education – public or private – proceeds with their “contingency plan” that is socio-culturally dissociated from educating future generations to become more responsible and ethical citizens.

These major actors in the market surely amplify the risks.

Shifting the focus to individual-level risks, all the perceived risks (physical, financial, performance, psychological, and social) associated with consumption choices and practices had always been a source of reservations that the market and marketers could together overcome because those risks were readily observable, easily traceable, fairly controllable, and even completely removable. This virus, however, possesses no such characteristic. When all the perceived risks eventually manifest into terror, spooked consumers in the AC (After Coronavirus) market invoke two *modus operandi*: involuntary asceticism by the haves, and mandatory tightwadism by the have-nots. Predictably, this “coronated-consumption” will catalyze an overhaul of the prevalent value paradigm in the market.

Valorizing the Liquid

Consumers had been co-creating market value with marketers at the expense of what ought to be more valuable: health, freedom, equality, environment, and all the *sine qua non* that was taken for granted but seldom delivered by the mass market. The greatest-ever number of choices available for consumers is the cause and effect of liquidating the solid values and rigid institutional settings that used to provide security, certainty, and stability (Bauman 2000). Echoing Beck’s (1992) notions of risk society and individualization, the current state of consumers as critical

actors in the market system can be described as hyper-responsibilized subjects whose identities and lives are the outcomes of their choices. The precarious life as a given condition in late modernity might have just reached singularity, from which there can be no return to the previous.

Despite the numerous choices in the market, many workers in the market would come to a realization that they have become a failed underclass due to the loss of job and income (Standing 2011). Versatile, multi-tasking-friendly, and entrepreneurial consumers may choose another identity for themselves: the gig workers. The relatively new identity, however, will paradoxically require more and better connection to the world in this time of disconnection because the success of their new occupation and identity project hinges on reviews and ratings of their skills and social interactions (for perils of gig working, see Scholz 2016). Regardless of such a possibility, many will still struggle with reduced economic resources to stay “responsible” consumers who contribute to the market economy.

When the “accursed share” (i.e., economic excess; Bataille 1991) can no longer be generated and/or obtained sufficiently due to the idiopathic (economic and clinical) depression, any remaining or to-be-created accursed share will be spent on the idea(l)s and principles the market society had mangled through rampant commodification. This reallocation will encourage some transformative consumption practices that nonetheless provide opportunities for current and future marketers. As much as the liquidation in society accelerates, the desperation for reinstatement of the traditional values will magnify. The caveat, however, is that there will be ever-deeper polarization of the ways in which individuals, organizations, policymakers, and all other stakeholders see capital, the economy, and human life. The role of conscious (hopefully, successful, as well) marketers in the future will accordingly be to get in a position to contribute to reducing the gap between extremes rather than monetizing the existence of the ever-growing gap.

As epitomized in the Chinese social credit system, based on hyper-surveillance and social reporting, civility in the AC era may no longer be the ability to situate oneself and behave within social norms. Rather, it may be the conscious and responsible practice of limiting the number of occasions to be civil and maximizing individual efforts to sustain the healthy and livable (although such an effort is often unrecognized). It would encompass economic, environmental, and medical sensibility, as well as class-consciousness, and essentially renovate etiquettes. Classics such as Erasmus’ *On Civility in Children* may be revived and re-popularized as part of the new zeitgeist. Public education, higher

education, and lifelong education may also demand new content and delivery methods for the new definition of *homo socialis*. Accordingly, the market will have to fill the void where contagious sociality used to prescribe the accustomed etiquettes.

Together, mysophobia (fear of germs), haphephobia (fear of being touched), anthropophobia (fear of people), the pursuit of truly “connectable” and life-enhancing social media consumption, and reduced sociality call for localized consumption and lifestyles rather than the glamorized global. Consumers’ escalated desires for safety, connected individuality, and neo-tribal support may accelerate the ongoing shift from “the universal” to “the particular.” Being *local* will mean much more than just local produce, businesses, and communities. It will signify high-viscosity relationships and high-visibility identities in all human activities. Choices that the liquidity in late modernity made available to mask one’s identity and personal life will be still accessible. An increasing range of consumers, however, will realize the value of the “solid” social that provides various kinds of support, compassion, and the fundamental sense of being, belonging, and believing. This transformation in the AC market system will require marketers to recognize a new need, namely “becoming-other,” to live in a world of continuous changes as an individual.

Forging Ahead

Exposure has provided some long-wanted, as well as some unsought, transparency but that very transparency may be realized as “obscenity.” When things become too real, too close, too immediate, and all-too-exposing, they become obscene. Perhaps we all may also be perverted, continuously monitoring the obscene and desperately wanting what is unacceptable or even proscribed. Nonetheless, we must risk being obscene and perverted just to survive. In this new risk society, the only new normal is distrust. Governments, systems, institutions, history, experts, and the market face an inestimable level of distrust. The BC (Before Coronavirus) market that once operated well by relying on its own momentum will become passé unless it can transcend its *raison d’être* to extract economic value from everything and anything. The AC market needs to re-positivize life in a new market society by addressing (and tamping down) conspiratorial discourses, ensuring accountability, neutralizing nihilism, supporting local community (physical and virtual) development, and, most importantly, helping to re-imagine the social. Such transcendence in a market society will be arduous but not unreasonable; it will require sacrifice, courage, keen insight, and, most essentially, an unparalleled level of tolerance.

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